

Lord's
FLAMING
Summer
LUCY
LANGTON

A Dangerous Game of Lust

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

LUCY LANGTON

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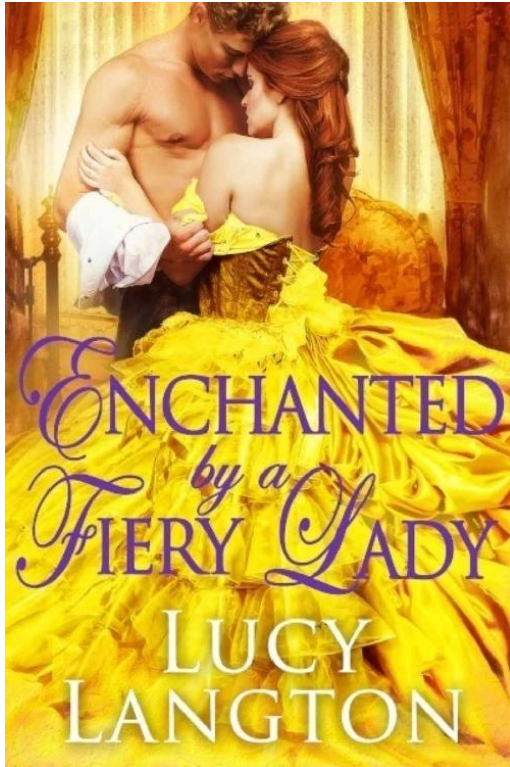
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A Dangerous Game of Lust

Introduction

Miss Ruth Middleton, the daughter of an untitled solicitor finds herself caught between two worlds. When her noble friend invites her to the Earl's estate for the summer, Ruth could never imagine the sinful days that are about to come... When she encounters the wicked son of the Earl, sparks will fly and Ruth will find herself unable to resist the Lord's tempting seduction.

If only desire could overcome status...

Lord Hugh Solton, the son and heir of the Earl, is upset with his father's decision to invite their distant relative Patricia and her humble companion to Sandhurst Hall. However, from the moment the enticing and innocent Ruth catches his eye, an intriguing, but forbidden romance starts to grow. Could he ever seriously consider a future by her side?

A cruel twist of fate...

Ruth and Hugh's flaming passion is trapped between society's necessities and a scandal that will turn their worlds upside down. When Patricia expresses her interest in Hugh, the revelation of a well-kept secret will challenge Hugh and Ruth's lustful affair... Will the fatal events strengthen their tantalising romance or it will all burn

vainly into ashes?

Chapter 1

Miss Ruth Middleton stepped out onto the street, tightening her gloves. The carriage was already there awaiting them. She felt a sharp pang of nerves, making her heart race uncomfortably. She took a deep breath, trying to calm herself.

“Ruth,” scolded her mother, rushing towards the carriage. “Why are you standing there gaping? We are already running a little late.” Mrs Middleton cast an anxious glance down the street. “I do hope the traffic is light, or else we shall arrive after all the other guests, and that would not do at all.”

Ruth smiled tremulously. “Yes, Mama. I am coming.”

Her mother stood behind her as she stepped into the carriage and sat down, making sure Ruth’s gown was smoothed out for the trip. Mrs Middleton gave a harrumph of satisfaction before settling herself down opposite Ruth. The older lady rapped on the top of the carriage. It gave a sudden lurch before heading off down the street.

“Remember to only speak when you are addressed,” said Mrs Middleton, frowning slightly. “A true lady is always demure. You are a stranger to all these people and do not have the connections to approach them.” She paused, gazing out the carriage window. “Miss Poldark has bestowed a great honour upon you in even inviting you to this afternoon tea party.”

Ruth bit her lip. “Yes, Mama. I do realise that.” She took a deep breath. “I wonder why she even bothered. I only spoke to her briefly at the charity event. It is most inexplicable.”

Mrs Middleton smiled complacently. “Well, Miss Poldark is an amicable young lady. She must have decided to take you under her wing.” She paused. “The Poldark’s are a great family, Ruth. Mr Poldark has noble connections, you know. I have heard that they are distantly related to the Earl of Montbatten.”

Ruth squeezed her hands together. She hadn’t realised that, although she was of course aware that Miss Patricia Poldark was very far above her on the social ladder. So far above that it was amazing indeed that Ruth had received an invitation to this afternoon tea at the Poldark’s fashionable townhouse on Grosvenor Square.

She sighed heavily, trying to quell her nerves. Miss Poldark had seemed lovely when they had spoken briefly and appeared to genuinely like her. But Ruth was mindful that the invitation to today’s event was probably only a token gesture, given out of momentary kindness to the daughter of her father’s solicitor.

She sighed again. It wasn’t as if she was ashamed of the fact that Papa was a solicitor and that the Middleton’s lived in a modest house in Cheapside. Not at all. But it was quite another thing to be socialising with such high company. She was painfully aware of her inferior connections and the fact she was hardly a wealthy, fashionable debutante.

Ruth ran her hands down her gown, smoothing out the creases. It was one of her very best day gowns—a white muslin with charming green embroidery along the bodice and sleeves—but she knew it would look cheap beside the gowns of all the other ladies who would be attending today.

She was bracing herself for the cold, patronising looks she would receive. But perhaps she was thinking too much; being too self-conscious. The grand ladies and gentlemen at this afternoon tea party probably wouldn't even glance at her, never mind notice her gown.

"A lot is riding on this tea party," continued her mother, as the carriage turned down a busy street. "This is your chance, Ruth. If you continue cultivating this blossoming friendship with Miss Poldark then you may rise. Who knows what could happen? You may make a very advantageous marriage indeed."

Ruth bit her lip again. "Mama, it is too much pressure. I am only the daughter of a solicitor. I have no real dowry nor any connections." Her chest heaved. "I think you are aiming too high for me. And I do not want to disappoint you."

Her mother frowned. "Ruth, you are too modest. Yes, you are the daughter of a solicitor, but you have a natural genteel air. You are also very lovely, in a fresh faced way." She gave a bark of laughter. "A far cry from the sophisticated charm of these high society ladies. But you can use that to your advantage, my dear."

Ruth didn't respond. She gazed out the carriage window. It was a busy Tuesday afternoon in London. There were street stalls lined up along the street they were travelling along, selling everything from pork pies to bouquets of flowers.

A cacophony of colour and sound. There were shouts from the street sellers, spruiking their wares, and a ragtag collection of people walking the streets, ranging from street urchins to middleclass gentlemen, heading back to their offices.

Her stomach flipped over. It was colourful and vibrant, but the streetscape would soon change. They would be travelling into the wealthy and fashionable districts of London. The streets would become wide and tree lined with high class ladies and gentlemen promenading along them. It was a world away from where she lived. A world away from where she came from.

Could she bridge those two worlds?

She flushed with mortification. Her mother desired her to, very much. Mama had always been mindful of bringing up her only daughter to aspire higher. There had been private pianoforte, dancing and drawing lessons, so that Ruth might look and act like a real lady. Lessons that Ruth knew her family could barely afford. But her parents considered the money well spent. They thought of her as an investment in their future.

She took a deep, ragged breath. What if she failed them? She was only middleclass Ruth Middleton, after all. She preferred books and solitude to socialising. Even stepping into these high society events made her tremble with fright. She always felt like a startled bird about to take flight, painfully conscious that she was merely a sparrow compared to the vibrant peacocks around her.

Ruth's nerves had taken full flight as she and her mother walked into the fashionable drawing room in the tall townhouse on Grosvenor Square. There were at least a dozen ladies and gentlemen milling around the room. She spotted her hostess, Miss Poldark, seated in the middle of the room, laughing as she sipped tea.

Ruth bit her lip. Miss Patricia Poldark was so very elegant. She was dressed in a simple teal green gown, but the quality of the dress was obvious, from the material to the cut of it. Her golden hair was swept back into a chignon at the nape of her neck, with curls framing her face. She looked like she had stepped straight out of one of those fashionable ladies magazines.

Ruth knew that Miss Poldark was only eighteen, merely a year older than herself. But she seemed at least five years older in sophistication. Ruth felt like a country mouse by comparison. Or a drab middleclass girl, trying to be something she was not.

“Stand up straighter,” hissed her mother, into her ear. “You are slouching, Ruth.”

Ruth took a deep breath, attempting to do what her mother wanted. But all *she* wanted to do was turn on her heel and flee as fast as she could.

Suddenly, Miss Poldark saw them. Her eyes lit up. Hastily, she stood up, sweeping towards them, her face wreathed in smiles.

“You came, Miss Middleton,” she cried, taking Ruth’s hands in her own, and gazing at her fondly. “How lovely you look, my dear. The embroidery on your gown is quite charming.”

Ruth smiled faintly. “Miss Poldark. You are too kind.”

“Not at all,” said the young lady. She turned to Ruth’s mother. “And Mrs Middleton. I trust you are well?”

“Very well, I thank you, Miss Poldark,” replied the older lady. “We are very honoured you invited us here today! What a beautiful home you have!”

Miss Poldark laughed dismissively. “Oh, it is rather too cold for my liking! It takes my dear mama an age to heat all the rooms adequately in winter. She is always complaining about it.”

Ruth’s smile widened. She didn’t believe it for a moment. Grosvenor Square was one of the most exclusive addresses in London. Miss Poldark’s mother would be able to afford enough firewood to keep fires burning constantly in every room of this large house.

But the comment showed that Miss Poldark was not trying to lord it over them. Her first instincts about the young lady had been correct. Miss Poldark wasn’t pretentious and did not put on any airs and graces.

“Oh, there is Mrs Poldark,” said Ruth’s mother, her eyes lighting up as she spied the lady of the house in a corner, chatting with some other older ladies. “I should go over and pay my respects.”

“Of course,” said Miss Poldark, taking Ruth’s arm firmly. “I shall take this little gosling under my wing. Please enjoy, Mrs Middleton.”

Mrs Middleton headed off to the group of older ladies. Miss Poldark turned to Ruth, smiling brightly.

"I truly am so happy you came today," she whispered. "These tea parties are usually such dull affairs. I swear I was nodding off with boredom before you came." She paused. "Let us sit down and chat privately before I introduce you to the party. I want you all to myself for just a little while."

Ruth nodded, stifling her amazement. Why Miss Poldark had taken such an immediate shine to her was beyond her, but it was pleasant. It made her feel so much more comfortable.

They settled down in a window alcove. Miss Poldark took her hand as she spoke.

"How have you been, my dear?" she asked gently. "I thought that you might enjoy some time away from your dear mama. She is rather protective of you, is she not? Rather like a hawk guarding its baby chick."

Ruth laughed. "That is a very apt likeness, Miss Poldark! Mama is indeed protective of me. But then, I am my parent's only child. They worry about me." She bit her lip. "It can sometimes feel like I am being smothered, just a little, but I am mindful they just want the best for me."

Miss Poldark sighed heavily. "It is so very tedious, is it not, being a young lady? I thought that I would enjoy my first London season so much more. But my own mother watches me like a hawk as well." She paused. "It would be simply wonderful to go off on an adventure, like a young gentleman. They are allowed to cavort around the countryside and even go abroad."

Ruth gazed at her, astonished. "Well, I suppose you are right. But I have never thought of it that way before." She shrugged her shoulders. "This is what we must do. All that we are allowed to do, Miss Poldark."

The lady smiled warmly. "Please, call me Patricia. I already feel like you are a friend, rather than simply one of many acquaintances. And may I call you Ruth?"

Ruth was touched. "Yes. I would be honoured... Patricia."

"Very well," said the young lady, nodding with satisfaction. "I just know we are going to be the best of friends! I felt it the moment I set eyes upon you." She paused. "I am speaking the truth, my dear. I am very much disillusioned with London already. But it seems I am stuck here for the season. You shall make it so much brighter."

Ruth stared at the young lady closely. She simply could not believe that she did speak the truth. Patricia Poldark had London in the palm of her hand. She was a wealthy, fashionable young lady, possessed of charm and beauty. She could go anywhere she wanted to and probably did. So then why would she prefer the company of a middleclass girl who was so below her and want to be friends with her?

"I miss Sussex," continued the young lady, with a heavy sigh. "Our country home. It is so beautiful and tranquil there." She wrinkled her nose. "London has been a whirlwind of engagements since my debut. Mama insists I accept every invitation. She is trying her hardest to get me engaged to every eligible bachelor she sees. I find it trying in the extreme."

Ruth sighed too. "Yes, my dear mother wants to get me safely married as well. The more advantageous the match the better." She hesitated. "But she is trying for naught, I fear. No eligible bachelor would deign to look upon *me*. I am poor and obscure..."

"Fiddlesticks," declared Patricia firmly. "You are one of the most genteel ladies I have met, Ruth. Your air and manners are simply lovely. And you are so very beautiful as well, my dear. Any young gentleman would be lucky to secure you for a wife."

Ruth smiled wryly. "That is very kind of you, Patricia. But the fact remains I have no connections and no dowry. It might not matter to you, but it does to a lot of people, I am afraid. It is simply the way of the world."

Patricia frowned. "Well, then the world is wrong, if they cannot see what I see in you. I have never cared for such things as connections and wealth. I would much prefer to be with genuine people who I get along with." She paused, her eyes suddenly bright. "With my help, Ruth, you could go very far indeed. I can introduce you to many people in my circle if that is what you truly want."

Ruth smiled faintly. "I am not as ambitious as my parents. I do not have a grand plan for my life. I simply want to marry a man who I love and who loves me in return. Is that so very wrong?"

Patricia's eyes misted with tears. "It is not wrong at all. It is what I want for myself, as well." She frowned. "My parents would arrange a marriage of convenience if they could for me, but I am trying to delay it as long as possible. If only I was free to do as I want..."

"What do you want to do?" asked Ruth gently. "What is it that your

heart desires?"

Patricia coloured, biting her lip. "Oh, it does not matter! I have spoken too much! Let us go and join the party, my dear. I should not monopolise you in such a manner."

Ruth nodded, feeling a little disappointed. She had been enjoying this private conversation with the young lady so very much. She had almost forgotten that they were in company at all. But Patricia spoke the truth. They should socialise. Ruth's mother would give her a tongue lashing in the carriage home if she thought that Ruth hadn't made an effort today.

They stood up. Patricia took her hand again.

"I have very much enjoyed our talk," she said slowly. "And my instincts were right about you. You are indeed a kindred spirit, Ruth."

Ruth's eyes filled with tears. Miss Patricia Poldark was so very kind and amicable. It seemed that she had made a friend. A true friend. And that was a very good thing to have in this world. Even if Patricia was so very high above her.

At dinner that evening at home, Ruth smiled, thinking about the afternoon. It had been as awkward as she had imagined it would be after she had started socialising. None of the fine ladies and gentlemen took one skerrick of interest in her after they had ascertained her position on the social ladder. But strangely, it hadn't bothered her.

She had made a firm friend in Patricia Poldark. And that was more important to her than a hundred superficial acquaintances.

“And how was the afternoon tea, Ruth?” asked her father, looking at her keenly.

“It was very fine, Papa,” she said, smiling at him widely. “Miss Poldark is charm itself. And she was so very kind to invite me.”

“Indeed,” said her father, picking up his wine glass. “The Poldark’s are a fine family, my dear. They have been clients with our law firm for many years now. Miss Poldark showed great condescension in inviting you.”

“Oh, it was simply wonderful,” enthused her mother, turning to her husband. “Their house on Grosvenor Square is magnificent, George. Beyond anything you can imagine. There seemed to be a hundred rooms in it, as well as a grand ballroom. I have never seen the likes of it in all my life.”

Mr Middleton smiled. “Yes. They are very wealthy. The Poldark’s own a country estate in Sussex as well.” He beamed at Ruth. “To think, my own daughter, being invited to one of their homes! I am very proud of you, Ruth. You must take advantage of Miss Poldark’s interest in you. It could lead to great things if you play your cards right.”

Ruth smiled tightly. “I am happier with the fact of making a friend, Papa.” She hesitated, then plunged onwards. “But just because Miss Poldark likes me does not mean that any of her ilk will. Most people I

spoke with today took no interest in me whatsoever...”

“It takes time, my dear,” said her father, waving a dismissive hand in the air. “Cultivate the friendship and others will slowly become receptive towards you.” He winked at her. “I did not spend a small fortune trying to make you an accomplished lady for nothing, you know.”

Ruth’s face coloured. It sounded so mercenary. As if she were a prize pig being tarted up for auction day. But then, her heart softened. Her parents were only trying to improve her lot in life, after all. They loved her dearly and wanted the very best for her. She must always remember that. And they were no different to most people. Every class aspired to rise in any way they could.

The dining room door opened and Claire, their one servant, walked in. She was carrying a letter in her hand.

“What is it, Claire?” asked her mother.

Claire smiled. “A letter just arrived for Miss Ruth, ma’am.” She handed it to Ruth, before walking out of the room.

Ruth gazed at it in astonishment. She hardly received any mail. Especially not of an evening. The post usually arrived in the morning. Which meant that this letter had been sent by special delivery.

“Well, go ahead and open it, Ruth,” smiled her mother.

Ruth broke the red wax seal. It was from Patricia Poldark. She read it quickly, before sitting back in her chair.

“Who is it from?” pressed her mother.

“It is from Miss Poldark,” she said slowly. “She would like me to have tea with her at some tearooms on Regent Street tomorrow.” She paused. “She said there is something she wishes to discuss with me immediately.”

Mrs Middleton clapped her hands together in delight. “Oh, it is happening! You are in her good books, dearest. A private invitation to take tea? I wonder what she wants to discuss with you?”

Ruth shrugged her shoulders. She was wondering the same thing.

“She does not say,” she said slowly. “I guess I shall find out tomorrow.”

Her father beamed at her. “Miss Poldark is a very good friend to have in London,” he said, sipping his wine. “A very good friend indeed!” He turned to his wife. “Clear all your engagements tomorrow, my dear. The carriage must be made available for Ruth. Nothing else is more important.”

His wife nodded. “Of course. I shall do a spot of shopping on Regent Street while Ruth takes tea with Miss Poldark. We did not have anything much planned for tomorrow anyway...”

Ruth tuned her parents out, as they kept discussing the Poldark's, and the great favour they were bestowing upon her. She smiled slowly as she stared down at the letter. She was looking forward to seeing Patricia again. What was she going to tell her?

Chapter 2

Patricia was already waiting for her as Ruth walked into the tearooms the next day. Her new friend waved excitedly. Ruth smiled back, taking a seat opposite her, gazing around. There were probably about a dozen ladies in the rooms, sipping tea as they chatted.

“Welcome,” said Patricia, her eyes shining. “I am so glad you could make it! I was a bit worried that I had given you too short notice...but I simply had to see you again immediately to ask you!”

Ruth laughed. Her new friend’s excitement was infectious.

“Ask me what?” she said slowly.

“All in good time,” beamed Patricia. “First, let us have a grand tea. I have already ordered, and they are just waiting for you to arrive.” She turned around, waving a hand at the attendant.

Ruth smiled, as the tea started arriving. Patricia had ordered enough to feed a small army. A three-tiered dish laden with cucumber sandwiches, delicate eclairs and freshly baked scones. A large rose patterned tea pot arrived along with matching teacups. Patricia picked up the pot, pouring.

“It is a lot of food,” laughed Ruth, picking up a sandwich. “I do not know if I can do it justice, Patricia. It is not so long since I broke my fast.”

Patricia laughed, handing her a cup. "I know I have probably gone overboard. But I could not help it. I wanted it to be a celebration tea." She paused, her eyes shining. "Remember how I was saying yesterday that London bored me to tears and I longed to escape it?"

Ruth nodded as she sipped her tea. "I do."

Patricia took a deep breath. "Well, I might just have found the very thing! For both of us!"

Ruth smiled cautiously. What was her new friend going on about? It was most mysterious indeed.

Patricia picked up an éclair, popping it into her mouth, before continuing. "Oh, they are so divine," she enthused, swallowing it. "Anyway. After that tedious afternoon tea party ended yesterday, I received a letter, Ruth. From a distant relation of mine. The Earl of Montbatten, no less."

Ruth gaped at her. "Yes, I heard you are related to the Earl of Montbatten."

Patricia smiled. "A very distant relation," she continued. "A third cousin or something, on my father's side. I have only met him once or twice in my life. I barely remember him." She paused. "It is most peculiar. The Earl has invited me to his estate in Essex for an extended stay."

“How wonderful,” said Ruth, trying to mask her disappointment. She had been looking forward to spending more time with Patricia. But it seemed that their newly formed friendship must be put on hold—at least until she returned from her stay.

“Yes, it is,” continued Patricia, picking up a sandwich. “The best of it is that he said I can invite anyone I want to accompany me.” She took a deep breath, gazing straight at Ruth. “And I choose *you*, Miss Middleton! What do you have to say to that?”

Ruth was so gobsmacked she couldn’t speak. Surely, Patricia must be teasing her? She was only plain, poor Ruth Middleton, the daughter of a solicitor. She had never even met an earl. The thought of staying with one was simply beyond her.

“Say something, Ruth,” begged Patricia. “You look as if you have lost a guinea and picked up a shilling.”

“I...I do not know what to say,” she replied slowly. “It is very kind of you, Patricia, to think of me. But I cannot possibly stay at an earl’s estate.” She paused. “I am sure he meant someone from your own circle. He would not welcome *me* into his home for an extended stay.”

“Ruth, stop it,” said Patricia firmly. “He told me I can bring anybody. And I want to bring you. It is as simple as that.” She stared at Ruth closely. “You must stop feeling as if you are undeserving, my dear. The Earl entertains widely at his home. He shall not judge you because of your connections. And if he did, I would censure him soundly.”

“It is not as simple as that,” said Ruth, feeling tears hovering at the back of her eyes. “I do not have the wardrobe to stay in such a grand

place. All would be judging me because of my clothing, and everything else about me. I would stick out like a sore thumb, Patricia. I felt out of place at your afternoon tea yesterday...”

Patricia reached out a hand, closing it over Ruth’s. “I want you there because you are my very favourite person. The most enchanting person I have met in London. I do not want you there because of your clothing. It means nothing to me.”

Ruth bit her lip, keeping the tears at bay with difficulty. She was very mindful of the honour Patricia was bestowing upon her. If her mother was sitting beside her, she would be over the moon. She would insist that Ruth accept immediately. Ruth supposed she was lucky that her mother was perusing bonnets in a millinery at this very moment, otherwise she wouldn’t have a chance to think at all.

Because it wasn’t as simple as her parents believed it was. They thought that because they had brought Ruth up to be a lady that it was only a matter of her seizing opportunities that came her way. It was all so very black and white to them.

Ruth knew it was different. She was highly conscious of the cold glances, the contemptuous sneers, or the downright snubs she received whenever she was forced to attend high society events. She felt as if she was an imposter, as if she were pretending to be something she wasn’t. Everyone could see through her immediately, and if they did not, they soon did once she told them who she was and where she was from.

It was exhausting and it was dispiriting. Patricia had been the only high society person who had been kind to her and extended the hand of friendship. But Patricia was unusual.

How could Ruth stay in a grand earl's home for an extended period? Everyone would despise her and snub her. And she would have no retreat from it. She would have to smile and bear it and feel like she was dying inside from the humiliation.

Her face flushed with mortification, just thinking about it. They would all assume she was a fortune hunter, a poor lady from Cheapside, trying to ride on the coattails of Patricia. The poor little friend who Patricia had condescended to befriend. How could she bear it?

"Just think about it," said Patricia, patting her hand kindly. "But do not think too long. I have accepted the invitation and shall be heading to Sandhurst Hall before the week is out." She smiled faintly. "The sooner I can get out of London the better."

"Tell me about Sandhurst Hall," said Ruth carefully. "It is in Essex, you said?"

Patricia nodded. "Yes. The Earl owns over two hundred acres there. Sandhurst Hall is his ancestral estate. I believe it was built centuries ago—perhaps during the War of the Roses." Her smile widened. "I have been there once, when I was small. It looked like something out of a storybook to me. So very large and grand, with a moat and turrets, no less."

Ruth's eyes widened in alarm. "Oh dear. It sounds very grand indeed."

Patricia laughed. "Do not be intimidated by it, Ruth. It is just someone's home, when all is said and done. And the nobility are just the same as anyone else. They have the same faults, failings and fears as the rest of us. Even if they sometimes like to think they do not."

Ruth frowned. "Patricia, I am very honoured," she said slowly. "And does the Earl have a family? Who would be there?"

Patricia sighed. "The Countess passed away years ago. He has two children. His son and heir, Lord Solton and a daughter, Lady Isabella." She paused, frowning. "Lady Isabella married last year and lives away now. I think Lord Solton is still in residence but is rarely there. And even if he is, he will not eat you alive! No one will."

Ruth smiled awkwardly. "I daresay you think me as timid as a church mouse, but I am unused to such grand house parties," she said slowly. "I have never been to one. In fact, I have never stayed with anyone. Except my Aunt Lydia in a boarding house in Brighton when I was only eight." She laughed awkwardly.

Patricia picked up her cup of tea. "I understand, my dear. It is daunting but that should not stop you." She hesitated. "Do you not want to experience more of life than boring old London? This is your chance, Ruth. There shall be dinner parties and balls, but also visits around the countryside and I daresay we might go riding, as well. It will be great fun!"

Ruth smiled weakly. She had only been on a horse once in her life and it had terrified her. She wasn't used to riding at all. It was the one thing that her parents could not manage for her. The expense of keeping a horse for pure pleasure, on agistment, had been beyond them.

"Just think about it, as I said," continued Patricia. "Now, let us finish all this food, before it spoils. I can see the sandwiches curling as we speak!"

Ruth laughed, picking up a sandwich. Patricia was so very kind. Not only had she extended this invitation when they barely knew each other, but she had paid for all this food and tea as well. It would be churlish to refuse her. She knew that. But she still couldn't bring herself to say yes.

It was all so sudden, she thought. She hadn't expected anything like this. She had really only just met Patricia and even though they got along so well it was daunting in the extreme. She felt out of her depth entirely.

After dinner that evening, Ruth's family sat around the fire. Mr Middleton was reading a book, as was his habit. Mrs Middleton was working a cross stitch patch. Ruth tried to concentrate on her own book, but the lines were swimming in her vision. She couldn't focus at all.

Her mother put down her patch, frowning. "You have been very quiet all day, Ruth. You have barely said a word since your outing with Miss Poldark." She cleared her throat. "What did she wish to talk to you about so desperately?"

Ruth smiled weakly. "Oh, it was just to catch up..." she sighed, putting down her book. She couldn't not tell her parents, now that she had been asked directly. It would be akin to lying. "Actually, that is not quite the truth. She asked if I would care to accompany her on an extended house stay in the country."

Her mother gasped. Her father put down his book, staring at her.

“Where is this house stay?” he asked carefully. “Who would you be staying with?”

Ruth took a deep breath. “The Earl of Montbatten’s estate in Essex. Miss Poldark was invited there and told she was free to bring anyone she desired as a companion.”

Her father sat up straighter in his chair. “The Earl of Montbatten? Do you mean to say you have been invited to stay at Sandhurst Hall?”

Ruth nodded slowly. “Yes. That is the name of the house.”

Her parents exchanged looks. They both looked jubilant.

“Oh, this is glad tidings indeed!” cried her mother, her eyes shining. “To think, my own daughter, staying as a guest of an earl!”

“That is a very great honour,” said her father, smiling widely. “Why did you not tell us straight away?”

Ruth gazed down at the floor. “I guess I was conflicted about it,” she said slowly. “I am very mindful of the honour, Papa, but I feel unworthy of it. It is a rather intimidating thought.”

“Poppycock,” said her father firmly. “You are more than worthy of it! We have raised you to be a proper lady, after all! When would this visit take place?”

Ruth sighed. “At the end of this week. Miss Poldark says she wishes to leave London as soon as possible.”

“There is no time to lose then,” said her mother quickly. “We must go shopping. There is no time to order you any new gowns but we could buy you some new bonnets and gloves. Perhaps a parasol...”

“Mama, no,” said Ruth, biting her lip. “We cannot afford it. You already spend too much on me. I will not allow it.” She took a deep breath. “If I do go then I shall just have to go as myself and be done with it.”

“What do you mean, ‘if’ you go?” asked her mother, looking thunderous. “You have not already accepted Miss Poldark then?”

Ruth shook her head. “I would never accept an invitation like that without your permission. That is not the proper thing to do, Mama.”

Her mother looked indignant. “Well, you should have told us straight away! I do not understand your reticence about this, Ruth. It is a glorious opportunity for you. How can you not see that?”

Ruth’s eyes filled with tears. She had already just told her parents that she felt unworthy, and it intimidated her. But they had brushed her worries aside as if they meant nothing. And now, they were going to

force her to accept. Perhaps she shouldn't have said anything about it. How would they have ever known otherwise?

Instantly, she felt ashamed of herself. She couldn't keep anything like this from her parents. And really, she knew she had only been biding time by not telling them. She knew they would force her to go once they were aware of it.

"I do see that it is a good opportunity," she said carefully. "Of course, I do."

"I want you to write a letter to Miss Poldark now," said her mother. "Accept the invitation. We shall put it in the first post tomorrow morning." She clasped her hands together again. "A house stay! At an earl's home! Who knows who shall be there, and who you shall be introduced to? It is a dream come true!"

Ruth smiled weakly, standing up. She was glad that her mother was sending her upstairs to write a letter. She didn't think she could endure much more of this. She was starting to get a blinding headache and solitude would be welcome.

Upstairs, in the privacy of her room, she sat at the window, gazing down at the street. There was only one gaslight down there and everything was shrouded in darkness. She knew it would be different on Grosvenor Square and the other fashionable streets of Mayfair. The rich areas had many gaslights. Patricia would be able to walk her street at night comfortably if she was so inclined.

Ruth leant her head against the window frame. It was all so difficult. She couldn't stop feeling like she was a hothouse flower, being constantly groomed. She didn't want to hobnob with the wealthy,

fashionable crowd. She just wanted to be left alone. Why couldn't they see that?

She sighed heavily. Patricia couldn't understand her feelings of insecurity either. To her new friend, it was a simple matter. She liked Ruth and wanted her there. But Patricia had always belonged to that world and didn't know what it was like to feel outside of it. She could never understand what it felt like.

She got up, walking to her desk to write the acceptance letter. She couldn't put it off any longer. Her parents were insisting she accept. She might as well just get it over and done with.

By Friday afternoon, she was ready. Her one small trunk was packed, waiting in the foyer, to be hauled onto the back of Patricia's carriage. Ruth stared down at it, biting her lip. It was such a small, battered looking thing. She could just imagine the many expensive trunks Patricia would have.

"Look at you," said her mother, walking into the foyer and taking her hands. "My beautiful girl! I am so very proud of you!"

Ruth smiled. "There is no need to be proud of me, Mama. I have not done anything of note. All I did was accept an invitation to stay with a friend."

"Oh, you are being modest," said her mother, smiling widely. "It is quite an accomplishment to secure such an advantageous friendship,

which has led to you being invited to stay with an earl! Most girls would give their eye teeth for such an honour, Ruth."

"Indeed," said Ruth, feeling as if she might faint. The nerves were almost overtaking her. Thank the Lord that it was quite a journey to the Earl's country estate. Getting through London and its outskirts would take some time even before they reached the country. Hopefully, by the time they got there she might have calmed down a bit.

She bit her lip, trying to imagine the house. Patricia had said that it was truly grand, and her friend was used to fashionable, wealthy homes. Ruth hoped that the Earl of Montbatten was a nice man. Her father had told her that he was about sixty years and had a seat in the House of Lords in Parliament. He was probably formidable then. She quaked at the mere thought of him.

She held her breath. Patricia had told her that the Earl's son, Lord Solton, might also be in residence. Her father had known nothing about him, only that he was the heir to the title and the estate. Patricia had said that he was often not in residence. She hoped it was true. The less people she had to deal with on a daily basis the better.

There was a sharp rap at the door. Mrs Middleton gasped.

"Here she is," she said. "Oh, Ruth, what shall I do without you?"

"You will manage, Mama," said Ruth dryly.

Her mother pecked her on the cheek quickly. The door was opened. A

footman was standing there, ready to take her luggage. Ruth took a deep breath, walking out the door, followed by her mother.

The carriage was one of the grandest she had ever beheld. And Patricia was peering through the window of it, smiling brightly.

“Greetings, Mrs Middleton!” Her voice was high pitched with excitement. “Might I steal away your daughter for a little while?”

They both laughed. Ruth relaxed, just a little. Patricia was so vibrant and lovely. Perhaps it would not be so bad after all.

Her trunk was placed at the back of the carriage and secured. Ruth turned to her mother, staring at her.

“Have fun, dearest,” whispered Mrs Middleton. “And write to us. We shall be eagerly awaiting your news.”

And the next minute, she was in the carriage. It had plush green velvet seats. The coach driver cracked the whip, and they were away. Ruth stared out the window at her mother, who was waving, until they turned the corner and she vanished from view entirely.

She took a deep, ragged breath as she sat back. For better or worse, it was happening now and she couldn’t change it. All she could do was try her very hardest to charm everybody she met. God help her.

Chapter 3

Lord Hugh Solton strode through the long hallway of Sandhurst Hall, passing one parlour maid with her arms full of linen and a poker-faced footman. He didn't address either one of them. He was feeling rather too churlish to address the servants at the moment.

He burst into the study. His father, Lord Acton, the Earl of Montbatten, was sitting behind his desk. He frowned, staring at his only son and heir.

"What the devil?" he muttered, standing up. "What the deuce has gotten into you, Hugh, entering without knocking?"

Hugh took a deep breath. "Father, I have just been informed that we are expecting houseguests," he said slowly. "And that they are due today. Why did you not think it prudent to advise me of this?"

His father sighed heavily. "Ah, yes," he said, looking rather vague. "It is Oscar Poldark's youngest girl. Her name is Patricia. I have not seen her since she was still in her leading straps..."

Hugh controlled his impatience with difficulty. "Father, what on earth possessed you to extend an invitation to the daughter of your third cousin twice removed? You do not know her at all."

The Earl smiled. "Yes, well, that shall soon be remedied, will it not? They say she has grown to be a lovely young lady. Practically the belle of the season in London." He shrugged his shoulders. "I just thought

the place could do with some livening, my boy! It is like a mausoleum in this house, and we are the ghosts rattling the chains.”

Hugh sighed. He didn't know why he was surprised. This was just like his father, after all. The Earl was always impulsive, but he had gotten worse since his wife, Hugh's mother, had died. The fact that he had spontaneously invited a young lady they hardly knew for an extended house stay was quite in character, but it was damnably annoying, nonetheless.

It was Mrs Petty, the housekeeper, who had informed him of this surprise development. And she had told him that she had been asked to prepare not one, but two, guest chambers. Which meant that his father wasn't telling him everything. There was someone else coming to stay at Sandhurst Hall as well.

“And who is accompanying Miss Poldark?” he asked now, bracing for the response. His father might not even know, come to think of it.

The Earl sighed, riffling through some papers on his desk. “Aha!” he cried, holding a letter aloft. He squinted at it. “According to Patricia, it is a friend of hers. A Miss Ruth Middleton. Do you know her?”

Hugh rolled his eyes. “No, I do not. Do you know anything about this other young lady we are about to shelter and feed, Father? Or is it on a need-to-know basis?”

His father smiled, dropping the letter. “No need to get churlish, my boy! Two young ladies are better than one, after all! They shall be like a breath of fresh air through these musty old corridors.” He blinked rapidly. “This house is starved of feminine sparkle. Ever since your dear mother left this earth and then Isabella married that young

upstart...”

Hugh’s gaze softened. So that was what this was all about. His father missed his little sister, who had married and left Sandhurst Hall over a year ago. Isabella had always been the apple of the Earl’s eye. And they had grown closer when their mother, the Countess, had died. It had been a great shock to the Earl when Lord Fabian had asked for Isabella’s hand in marriage. And an even greater shock when Isabella had declared she wanted to marry him.

The Earl had been lonely ever since. He often took his meals alone in his study, brooding over the past, when Hugh wasn’t here. Mrs Petty had told him that. It had made Hugh feel a bit guilty about being away so often. But he was back, now, and all he wanted was for Sandhurst Hall to be sacrosanct. It was the one place he could relax and recharge before heading out again into the world.

A place that was now about to be invaded by two strangers.

Hugh sighed again. “What time are they due? Do you know that?”

His father shrugged. “They will get here when they get here, my boy. Mrs Petty has it all under control. Their chambers are ready. I made sure to tell Cook that we are expecting two more mouths at dinner tonight.” He smiled wickedly. “My work here is done.”

“Not quite,” said Hugh dryly. “You cannot expect that these young ladies can just arrive and be taken straight to their chambers. You shall have to greet them in the proper way.”

His father looked affronted, as if the thought had never occurred to him. "Oh. I suppose I must." He hesitated, staring beseechingly at Hugh. "Will you help me do it? The meet and greet? I would be ever so chuffed, my boy."

Hugh gritted his teeth. He didn't want to meet and greet the young ladies either. He had limited patience for young ladies as it was. They were all silly, giggling flibbertigibbets, in his opinion. And they only got worse as he got older.

He was seven and twenty now and the young ladies still hovered around him like bees to a honeypot, attracted by his title, wealth and good looks. He swore they got sillier by the year.

And that was the other reason he was so annoyed at his father about this impulsive invitation. If it had been a married couple, or two gentlemen, it might have been different. But two young ladies meant trouble. They would probably attach themselves to him like limpets, insisting he accompany them on walks and outings and dance with them at balls.

He bristled with annoyance. He just wanted to be left alone. In peace and solitude.

"Oh, alright," he muttered, shaking his head. "You have really taken the cake this time, Father. How long have you told them they can stay?"

The Earl shrugged his shoulders again. "I left it open. An indefinite stay!" He waved a hand in the air. "They can leave when they feel like it. I have nowhere to be and the longer the better, in my opinion."

Hugh rolled his eyes again. “You do not know if you shall even like them, Father. You are taking a bit of a gamble. They could be flibbertigibbets. You might want them gone before the week is out...”

The Earl gazed at him sadly. “Hugh, when did you become such a stuffy prig? We are talking about two young ladies. Why are you determined to not like them, even before you know them? What happened to giving people a chance, my boy?”

Hugh’s mouth tightened. He didn’t think he was a stuffy prig, as his father so eloquently put it. He just thought he was being cautious and protective of their home. There *was* a difference. Just because the Earl was becoming more eccentric with every passing year.

“You need to loosen up, my boy,” continued his father, winking at him. “Live a little! You are acting like an old man. You are acting like my father.”

Hugh barked with laughter. “Well, I shall oversee the preparation of the chambers and call you when our guests arrive. How does that sound?”

“It sounds brilliant,” said his father, already looking down at his papers and losing focus. “Just brilliant. I shan’t be too much longer...”

Hugh nodded. Then he turned and left the room. His father was sitting down again, absorbed in his paperwork. When Hugh knocked on the door he would probably have quite forgotten about the guests once again.

He strode down the hallway, looking for Mrs Petty. If his father wouldn't oversee the preparation of the guest chambers, then he supposed he must. It would kill some time while he waited for these young ladies, at any rate. His nostrils flared in annoyance.

All he wanted to do was retreat to his study with a glass of his finest brandy and a book. But it seemed that it would be quite a while until he was free to do that now.

He thought of the second guest. A Miss Ruth Middleton.

He sighed heavily. He had told his father the truth. He had never heard of her. He assumed she must be a well to do, fashionable young lady if she was friends with Patricia Poldark.

He had heard that Miss Poldark was indeed the belle of the current London season, feted and admired by all. That fact alone intrigued him. If Miss Poldark was having such a successful season, why did she accept this invitation to stay with his eccentric father, a man she barely knew, at a house buried deep in the countryside? There would not be any lavish balls, soirees, or recitals here. Nor much of a chance for a young lady to secure a good marriage.

Mrs Petty was walking quickly down the hallway towards him, her keys jangling at her pocket. He pushed the thought of the mystery of the two young ladies aside. For better or worse, they would be arriving soon. And their chambers needed to be in order.

Ruth gazed out the carriage window. They had left London well behind. They had travelled through the outskirts of the city, through a few villages, until the landscape had changed. Now, all she could see was rolling, verdant green hills, scattered here and there with wildflowers.

She took a deep breath. It was beautiful countryside. More than beautiful. She had never been in this part of the country before. But then, she had never journeyed much outside London at all. And the wonder of it was accentuated by the glorious weather. The sun shone brightly in a clear, crystal blue sky. It was almost the height of summer.

“How are you feeling, Ruth?” asked Patricia abruptly, smiling. “You have grown quieter as the journey has gone on. I do hope you are not still feeling nervous?”

“A little,” admitted Ruth, turning to her friend. “It is all so new and overwhelming for me.” She took another deep breath. “I just hope that the Earl and anyone else we meet likes me. That I am not a disappointment to you.”

Patricia waved a dismissive hand. “Of course, they will like you! How could they not? You are charm personified.” She leaned forward, taking Ruth’s hands in hers. “Do not worry so much, my dear. All will be well.”

Suddenly, Patricia gazed out the window. She let go of Ruth’s hands as her eyes widened.

“There it is!” she cried, pointing. “Sandhurst Hall!”

Ruth leant forward, gazing out the window. They were almost at the top of a hill. In the distance, nestled in a valley, was the grandest, largest house she had ever seen in her life. It was so vast that it seemed to go on forever. And there was indeed a moat and turrets, just like Patricia had said. It was like gazing upon a palace.

Her stomach started churning violently. It was happening. Soon, she would be staying in that grand, imposing house. And she had never felt more like an imposter in her life.

The carriage slowly drove around a vast circular driveway, towards the front entrance of Sandhurst Hall. Ruth saw two gentlemen standing on the front steps.

One was quite old, with pure white hair. He was tall but had a slight stoop. The other was younger, probably in his late twenties or early thirties. He was as tall as the other man, but stood proudly, with shoulders flung back, like a soldier at attention. He had raven black hair. He wasn't smiling.

The carriage drew up. A footman sprang forward, opening the door. They got out, walking towards the two gentlemen.

“Lord Montbatten!” cried Patricia, suddenly surging forward. “We have arrived at long last!”

The older man smiled widely, rushing forward and taking Patricia's hands in his own. He gazed at her with kind, shining eyes. Ruth hung back, biting her lip. Her stomach was churning so violently now she felt like she was going to be sick.

"My dear Patricia!" he cried. "Why, what a beauty you have become! It makes these old eyes so glad to gaze upon you. How have you been, my dear?"

"Oh, tolerably well," said Patricia, beaming at him. "It was a whirlwind in London but I am happy to be out of it. I am very much looking forward to the fresh country air and spending time at Sandhurst Hall."

"Very good," said the Earl, nodding vigorously. "Well, we shall have to work hard to entertain you. I do not want you to be bored." He paused. "You are very welcome, my dear."

He gazed expectantly at Ruth. "And who do we have here?"

Patricia smiled, dragging Ruth forward. "May I present my dear friend, Miss Ruth Middleton," she said. "Ruth, this is Lord Montbatten."

Ruth curtsied deeply. When she straightened, everyone was looking at her. Including the solemn younger gentleman on the steps, who hadn't moved an inch.

“It...it is very good to make your acquaintance, My Lord,” she stuttered, her heart pounding in her ears.

“Oh, the pleasure is all mine, Miss Middleton,” said the Earl kindly. “And you reside in London, or did you just meet Patricia there during the season?”

Ruth’s eyes widened. “I... I live in London, My Lord. I... have never lived anywhere else.”

The Earl nodded. “Your family are friends with Patricia’s family then, my dear?”

Ruth blushed painfully. “In a manner of speaking, My Lord.” She mentally kicked herself. It was an odd response. Her mouth was so dry she couldn’t say another word.

There was an awkward silence.

The Earl turned back to the younger man, gesturing to him. “Come forward, Hugh, and say hello to our guests.”

The solemn gentleman walked slowly forward, bowing curtly.

“Miss Poldark,” he said, in a short, clipped voice. He turned to Ruth. “And Miss Middleton. Welcome to Sandhurst Hall.”

The ladies curtseyed.

“This is my son, the Viscount Solton,” said the Earl. “My son and heir, I might add! He shall be taking over this rambling old place when I kick the bucket...”

“Father,” said Lord Solton, in a reproving voice.

The Earl laughed. “It is life, my boy! None of us escape the clutches of the Grim Reaper I am afraid!”

Ruth and Patricia laughed. Lord Solton, however, did not smile. He turned and stared at Ruth. The gaze was so cold that the laugh died on her lips. She noticed that he had very dark brown eyes. So dark that they were almost black. And they were cold, too.

Ruth’s heart flipped over in her chest. This gentleman did not approve of her. She had barely said anything yet and she already knew it. But then, she supposed her awkwardness confused him. He was probably used to grand ladies like Patricia, who were so bright and confident.

Those dark eyes flickered over her figure, taking in her gown, her bonnet, her shoes...everything about her. Ruth flushed painfully. Lord Solton was gaining the measure of her, well and truly. And she knew that a viscount—the son and heir of an earl—would recognise that Miss Ruth Middleton was not a fashionable, wealthy lady at all.

There was not a skerrick of approval in that cold gaze. Despite the heat of the day, Ruth shivered. She felt like she was shrivelling

beneath the coldest of winter snowstorms.

“Well, let us get you into the house!” said the Earl. “I daresay you will want to get settled and rest after your long journey.”

They all walked through the front door into the house. Ruth suppressed a gasp. The foyer alone was one of the most palatial rooms she had ever entered. The ceilings were so high they made her dizzy. Beyond that she saw a large, circular staircase. A middle-aged woman in a plain brown dress was standing there.

“This is our housekeeper, Mrs Petty,” said the Earl. “She shall take you to your chambers and see you settled.” He turned to Patricia. “Perhaps we might all meet again in the drawing room for pre-dinner drinks at six? What do you say?”

Patricia beamed at him. “It sounds perfectly splendid!”

Ruth followed the housekeeper and Patricia up the stairs. Her heart was fluttering like a small bird. The house was truly the grandest she had ever seen. She still had to pinch herself that she was actually going to stay here as a guest.

When they reached the top of the staircase, she glanced down into the foyer. The Earl had already left. But Lord Solton was still standing there, his hands clasped behind his back. He was gazing up. Their eyes met for the briefest of moments, before Ruth hastily looked away, continuing to follow the others.

She shivered again, as they headed down a long hallway. A thought

stuck and lodged in her mind like an arrow.

He does not like me. He sees right through me.

The housekeeper opened a door, turning to Ruth. "These are your chambers, Miss Middleton. I trust you shall find them satisfactory."

Ruth walked slowly into the room. She had to suppress another gasp of wonder and astonishment.

It was a large room, painted apple green. There was an ornate ceiling rose on the roof and two tall windows, which were letting in beams of bright sunlight. A baroque four poster canopied bed stood in the centre of the room. Ruth also saw a dressing table, large wardrobe, and washstand.

It was the most beautiful room. A dream of a room. She never thought she would ever stay in a room such as this.

"Thank you," she whispered to the housekeeper. "It is most satisfactory."

Mrs Petty nodded. Patricia, who was still standing at the door, smiled widely.

"I shall let you unpack and rest, Ruth," she said, "while I do the same. Shall I knock on your door in an hour, and we can go down together, after we are dressed for the evening?"

Ruth nodded quickly. "That sounds perfect, Patricia."

Her friend's smile widened. "Jolly good! I shall leave you to it."

They both left the room. Ruth was quite alone at last. She walked slowly to one of the windows, gazing out. Her trunk was already in the room, in a corner, looking like a small, tatty thing amongst all this opulence. An intruder...the same as she was.

She sighed heavily, glancing back at the bed. She knew she would not be able to rest at all before dinner. Her nerves were relentless, biting at her, like a vicious terrier dog. She glanced back at her trunk. A maid would be in soon to help her unpack. She flushed, thinking of her clothes. She must find something suitable to wear for dinner. And every dinner after that. How was she going to manage at all?

She quaked. She wished that she had never accepted Patricia's invitation. She shouldn't have told her parents anything about it. She could still be safe and sound in her home right at this very moment. Instead, she was staying with strangers. The Earl seemed amiable, at least. A slightly befuddled, kind old gentleman. But his son was a different story entirely.

She walked to the bed, sitting down. She had never felt more out of place and strange in her life. She didn't belong in a place like this. And Lord Solton knew it. She could just tell.

Chapter 4

Hugh walked into the grand dining room, covertly watching the two young ladies look for their place cards. The other dinner party guests milled into the room, but he ignored them for the moment. He was still trying to figure out their houseguests, who had been here for two days now.

Miss Poldark smiled brightly as she found her place, settling in without much fuss. She was everything he had expected. A pretty, fashionable young lady with golden curls and elegant gowns.

She was confident, always holding her own in conversation. But she was just the same as every other fashionable young lady he had ever encountered. They were all cut from the same cloth. They had the same accomplishments and the same opinions.

His eyes slid to the other young lady, who was still hesitantly looking for her place card. Miss Middleton. Now, *she* was not cut from that cloth at all. He had deduced almost immediately that she was not as wealthy as Miss Poldark. Her apparel made it obvious. Her gowns were adequate but obviously not of the same quality as her friend's.

He took his own seat, still watching her. She was tall for a woman and willowy, with a swan like neck and long limbs. Her hair was light brown and she had blue eyes the colour of cornflowers. A small, turned up nose and dimples in her cheeks when she smiled. She was beautiful, in an understated way. There was nothing flashy or ostentatious about Miss Ruth Middleton. She also had gentle manners.

He knew by now that she was the daughter of the Poldark's solicitor.

A middleclass girl who lived in Cheapside. A fact that she was painfully self-conscious about. Whenever conversation veered to her upbringing, she always deflected it.

Miss Middleton found her seat at last, sitting down with a ramrod straight back as if she had just entered a schoolroom and was about to commence a lesson. Her nerves were obvious. Her eyes darted around the room, keenly watching everyone. She had visibly balked when his father had informed the ladies about this dinner party.

Eventually everyone was settled, and the first course commenced. Hugh had overseen the guest list himself. Two upstanding local couples. Pillars of the community. Lord and Lady Buxton, who lived on a large estate nearby, and Mr and Mrs Grantham. They were all old friends of the family.

After the first course and one or two glasses of the very best Madeira wine from the cellar, the chatter started to increase around the table. Miss Middleton seemed to relax, as well. Her cheeks were flushed from the wine and her blue eyes bright.

Lady Buxton leaned across the table, smiling at her. "Tell us a little a bit yourself, my dear," she said. "We are all familiar with Miss Poldark's family, but you are a mystery to us. His Lordship tells us you live in London?"

Miss Middleton nodded slowly. She suddenly looked scared. Hugh thought she didn't covet being the centre of attention.

"I do, My Lady," she replied, taking a gulp of wine. "I have lived in London all my life."

Lady Buxton frowned slightly. "My husband and I are quite familiar with London. We have a townhouse on Wimple Street. Do you know that area? Is that where you reside?"

Miss Middleton shook her head. The two bright spots upon her cheeks had deepened, so that her whole face was infused with a rosy glow. Hugh shifted in his chair. It was quite becoming, bringing out the blue of her eyes.

"I live in Cheapside, My Lady," she said quickly. "My father is a solicitor."

There was an awkward silence.

"I see," said Lady Buxton slowly, patting her mouth delicately with a napkin. "And do you have any notable family?"

She shook her head, looking mortified. "No, I do not. My father's family have always resided in that area. My paternal grandfather was a solicitor as well. He established the firm my father works at now." She took a deep, ragged breath. "My mother's family are in the rag trade. They own a fabric business."

There was another awkward silence. Miss Middleton took another deep gulp of wine.

"That is how I met Ruth," said Miss Poldark abruptly. "My father introduced me to her. I took an instant shine to her! She is simply the

most amiable young lady.”

“Indeed,” said Lady Buxton condescendingly. “How kind of you, Miss Poldark, to take her under your wing.”

“It is Ruth’s personal charms which shall be the making of her in society,” declared Miss Poldark loudly. “I see her going far indeed.”

The ladies at the table tittered and the gentlemen looked amused. The Earl leaned forward, his eyes shining.

“Good for you, Patricia,” he exclaimed. “What a good friend you are!”

Lady Buxton picked up her wine glass. “You are indeed generous to believe such a thing, Miss Poldark. The idealism of youth, I would say.” She took a sip of her wine. “But without proper background and connections one can only go so far in society, my dear.” She turned to Hugh, who was seated at her side. “Would you not agree, Lord Solton?”

Hugh bristled. “Well, proper background and connections *do* matter,” he said. “One cannot deny it. It is what keeps our society in order I would say.”

“Oh, absolutely,” said Lord Buxton. “One cannot have any riff raff mingling with the upper classes! I am not for all this egalitarian nonsense some of our ilk sprout.” He took a deep breath. “Like that scoundrel Shelley and the notorious Lord Byron. They would have us at the guillotine like they did in France. A bad business!”

“The less said on that subject the better,” huffed Mr Grantham, looking affronted. “That is one thing I love about England. Everybody knows their place and is not seeking to change it. Leave the revolutions to the continent, I say.”

There was laughter all round. The door suddenly opened, and the second course was brought in. Everybody fell silent as they picked up their knives and forks, tucking into the roasted pheasant and vegetables, smothered in a rich wine gravy.

Hugh glanced at Miss Middleton. She was picking at her food. And all the high colour had drained from her face. She looked pale and miserable. He felt a stab of pity for her.

Suddenly, as if she felt his eyes upon her, she glanced up at him. Her blue eyes looked troubled. His heart lurched. Miss Poldark was right—she was endearingly charming. He could see why she had befriended her. Miss Middleton had a gentle quality about her unlike any that he had encountered before.

He felt a wave of strong attraction towards her. Quickly, he dismissed it. Miss Middleton might be beautiful and have charming personal qualities, but she was the daughter of a solicitor from Cheapside. She had no notable family and no income. He could never seriously consider wooing her.

Hugh did believe in the sanctity of the social order, after all. He was a viscount and would be the Earl of Montbatten one day. Any lady he pursued must have superior connections. It was as simple as that. And as much as he felt sorry for Miss Middleton and her obvious discomfort, she was still a middleclass lady, from an obscure family.

After dinner, Ruth sat down on the settee in the drawing room, gripping her wine glass tightly. She didn't even want it. She had drunk quite enough of the Madeira wine at dinner, and it had made her feel a little giddy and then a little sick. All she wanted was for this evening to end so that she could crawl into bed.

Patricia was chatting easily with Lady Buxton and Mrs Grantham on the other sofa. The Earl and the other gentlemen were all standing near the fireplace. There were bursts of laughter from them. Ruth sipped her wine, before placing the glass down on a side table. How soon could she make her excuses and leave the company?

"You should play for us, Miss Poldark," Lady Buxton was saying to Patricia. "I am sure we would all love to hear how accomplished you are on the pianoforte."

Patricia smiled. "Oh, I do not know about that," she said. "I am not so very accomplished! My fingers simply do not want to do my bidding. My dear mama always despaired of my progress, even though she spent a small fortune on lessons." She looked at Ruth. "But perhaps my dear friend might be persuaded to entertain us?"

Ruth gaped at Patricia. The other ladies looked amazed as well. They obviously thought that a solicitor's daughter from Cheapside would have no accomplishments at all.

"I must decline," said Ruth quickly. "I do not have much talent either..."

Patricia gaped at her. "You are too modest, my dear! Why, you played like an angel the other day, when we were alone in this drawing room. I was quite astounded at how good you are."

Ruth blushed. "No, I truly could not..."

"Oh, come now," said Lady Buxton in a patronising voice. "I am sure we would adore hearing you play, Miss Middleton. We insist. Do we not, ladies?"

Mrs Grantham nodded uncertainly, obviously not relishing the thought of it at all. But Patricia sprang to her feet, pulling Ruth up from the sofa and dragging her to the pianoforte in the corner of the room.

"Go on," she whispered in Ruth's ear. "I was not lying. You play beautifully, Ruth. Let them all hear what a wonder you are!"

Ruth sighed heavily. "Do not make me do it, Patricia. They will all be watching me like a hawk, eager to pick up on any mistakes I make. It shall make me play badly."

"Ruth," said her friend, frowning. "You must believe in yourself. You know that you can play well. Who cares what any of them are thinking? You shall astound them. I am sure of it." She squeezed Ruth's arm. "I shall turn the pages for you."

Ruth took a deep breath. She knew that Patricia wasn't going to let her off the hook. Reluctantly, she sat down at the instrument, spreading her gown around her. Hesitantly she flicked through the music book on the stand, choosing a favourite piece, which was Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*. She raised her fingers above the keys before lowering them.

After one false start, she was soon lost in the music. Her fingers flew over the keys. It was reassuring having Patricia so close, turning the pages for her. She forgot what company she was in and even where she was. She forgot how awkward she had been feeling. All that mattered was the next note, so that it all flowed into a seamless whole.

She played the last notes, placing her hands onto her lap. Ruth suddenly came out of her reverie. There wasn't a sound in the room. The chatter had ceased entirely. Her heart beating hard, she glanced up fearfully.

The two ladies sitting upon the sofa were open mouthed with shock. And the gentlemen were all gazing at her with jaws dropped as well. If a monkey had suddenly gotten up and started playing Beethoven, they couldn't have looked more shocked.

"Oh, bravo," called the Earl, clapping. "Miss Middleton! What a sublime talent you are!"

Everyone joined in. Ruth flushed, standing up and quickly curtsying. She took a deep breath. The quiet chatter resumed. As she walked slowly back to the sofa, she felt Lord Solton's eyes upon her. They were speculative, almost quizzical.

She picked up her discarded wine glass, drinking deeply. It felt deeply satisfying. She might be an obscure lady from Cheapside, but her mother had insisted upon one of the best pianoforte tutors in London. She had always practised hard. Music was one of the joys of her life.

She knew she could never change her background or connections and that her excellent musical skills would probably never be fully appreciated. But suddenly, she didn't care at all. Let these grand people think what they liked about her. She couldn't change who she was and suddenly she was sick of trying.

She took another sip of the wine. Lady Buxton had pigeonholed her from the start, and all the others had quickly followed suit. She knew the Earl did not overly care about her background, but Lord Solton did. Even though she felt his eyes upon her often, they were still as cold as ever.

He didn't admire her in the least. Not that she had ever expected him to. In the two days since they had arrived at Sandhurst Hall, he had barely spoken two words to her. And she had seen him watching her thoughtfully when the Earl had questioned her background and she had been forced to reveal it. The Earl had been kind about it, but Lord Solton had not reassured her in anyway.

She glanced quickly at him. He hadn't exactly leapt to her defence when Lady Buxton had asked him if he agreed with her at the dinner party tonight that background and connections were everything. He had said something about the importance of keeping the social order and left it at that.

Her face burnt with mortification. She had always known that this extended house stay was going to be difficult. And she wasn't seeking the approval of a cold, rigid gentleman like him. Let him think what he liked about her. She couldn't change anything and that was all

there was to it.

Hugh quickly walked down the staircase towards the parlour. He had over an hour to kill before he was due at a luncheon in the local village. A tedious affair with the mayor and other influential figures of the district. It was a duty that his father used to do, but now the Earl had become a virtual recluse, it seemed that it had fallen upon his shoulders.

He walked into the parlour. Miss Poldark and Miss Middleton were sitting there, talking quietly amongst themselves. He stopped, staring at them.

“Please excuse me,” he said slowly. “I did not mean to intrude.”

Miss Poldark smiled pleasantly. “Not at all, Lord Solton! This is *your* home, after all.” Her smile widened. “Ruth and I were just about to head out for a walk through the gardens anyway. Would you care to join us?”

He was just about to refuse and beat a hasty retreat, when he hesitated. It was another glorious summer’s day. And he would be stuck in the village hall for most of the afternoon.

“Why not?” he said slowly. “Shall we, ladies?”

Out in the gardens, he stole a glance at Miss Middleton. She was wearing a pale blue summer gown today, with short, puffed sleeves. It looked charming upon her. Her skin was so dazzling white that it was almost luminous.

They started walking along the main path which led to a central rotunda. Bees and butterflies were hovering around the flowers, which were blooming with abandon. The scent was heavenly.

“How lucky you are to live amongst such splendour,” said Miss Poldark, glancing at him. “I declare that if I had such gardens at my disposal, I would be walking through them all the time.”

Hugh cleared his throat. “Yes, they are rather splendid. My father takes great pride in them. He has a team of top gardeners constantly tending to them.” He looked at Ruth. “Do you enjoy gardens as well, Miss Middleton?”

Ruth looked alarmed that he had addressed her. “I do like gardens, My Lord,” she said hesitantly. “I have visited Vauxhall Gardens often. And I like strolling through Hyde Park when I get the opportunity.”

“Do you and your family leave London often?” he asked slowly.

She shook her head. “No, indeed. It is very rare. My father works constantly, you see, and Mama does not like leaving him.” She paused. “Our lives are in London. Not that I am making a complaint. There is so very much to do and see in the city.”

“You are your parents only child?” he asked, gazing at her through

narrowed eyes.

Ruth nodded. "Yes. They always hoped for a son, of course. To carry on the family business. But it was not to be." She took a deep breath. "And you, My Lord? Do you have siblings?"

"Yes, he does," said Patricia quickly. "Do you not remember I told you about Isabella, Ruth?"

Ruth blushed. "Yes, of course. How silly of me to have forgotten."

"She is my younger sister," said Hugh, smiling wryly. "Isabella was always a little spoilt and indulged by my parents. But she has such a sweet and amiable nature that it is hard not to like her, regardless." He paused. "My father misses her keenly since she left Sandhurst Hall, as a married lady. He says that the house feels like a mausoleum."

"And where does she reside now?" asked Ruth.

"She is in Gloucestershire." He hesitated. "We shall see Isabella and her husband, Lord Fabian, at Christmastide. They always return to Sandhurst Hall for the festive season. She is excellent on the pianoforte, Miss Middleton. I would say almost but not quite as good as you."

Ruth blushed. A fiery glow which rose up from her neck and suffused her face. Hugh watched its progress with fascination. Her complexion was so flawlessly pale that it was marked. He had obviously made her uncomfortable with his praise.

"You are too kind," she stammered, lowering her eyes. "I practise a lot, that is all."

"You are too modest, Ruth," said Patricia, smiling. "I could not believe it when I heard you the other day! It was as if Beethoven himself had sat down at the keys!"

"You *are* talented," said Hugh slowly. "You have a very expressive way of playing, as well as being technically proficient."

"I enjoy it immensely," said Ruth, her blush deepening. "Perhaps that enjoyment comes out in my playing. I hope so."

He kept staring at her. He wanted to tell her that he loved music too. That it was one of the greatest joys of his life. But then he stopped himself. He didn't know why.

"I should return to the house," he said abruptly. "I have a luncheon appointment in the village and shall be late if I do not leave soon." He bowed curtly. "Thank you, ladies. It has been a great pleasure. Please enjoy the rest of your walk."

They curtsied. He turned away, walking quickly back towards the house. His hands were clenching into fists by his side.

He chided himself for even going on the walk. He shouldn't try to get to know Miss Middleton too well. And yet, the thought of her beautiful playing on the night of the dinner party still haunted him.

She was obviously a very accomplished young lady, in addition to her other charms.

He truly would not have expected such excellence in a middleclass girl.

He flushed painfully. It wasn't that he thought he was better than her. Not really. It was just that there were certain ways of doing things in his world. And wooing a girl inferior in class to him was not one of them.

He knew that other gentlemen would not have had such scruples. They would tease him, telling him to take his pleasure where he could. They would tell him he didn't have to be serious about her. They would say that a summer flirtation did not have to lead to a marriage proposal, after all.

He sighed heavily as he entered the house. He wasn't like those other gentlemen and never had been. And so, he could not contemplate Miss Ruth Middleton in good conscience.

His face twisted. More the pity.

Chapter 5

Ruth sighed, adjusting the bodice on the gown. Behind her the maid was straightening out some small creases in it, smoothing them with a sure hand. Ruth sighed again. She was almost ready. It was time for the big reveal.

“All finished, miss,” said the maid, whose name was Bessie. “You may look in the mirror.”

Ruth turned around slowly, staring at herself in the full-length mirror. She gasped. It was as if a different girl was standing there, staring back at her.

Bessie the maid had done an excellent job with her hair. It was an elaborate style, full of tiny plaits and braids, all swept up into a high bun. Tiny curls framed her face. But the piece de resistance was the gown. It was an absolute dream, a cacophony of cream silk and lace, with intricate beading along the bodice. A gown that she could never have afforded in a hundred years.

She bit her lip. She still wasn't sure at all that she should have accepted Patricia's loan of the gown. It was obviously expensive, as well as being exquisite. What if she spilled something on it this evening? What if she tore it?

There was a soft knock at the door. The next minute Patricia walked in, all dressed up in a shimmering gown of bluish green damask, with a net overlay. Her golden hair was piled on top of her head, affixed with a diamante comb. In her hair nestled a tall feather dyed the exact shade as her gown.

Patricia's eyes widened. "Oh, Ruth! How beautiful you are!" She clapped her hands together excitedly. "You shall be the belle of the ball!"

Ruth blushed. "You are teasing me, Patricia. I shall be no such thing." She turned around, facing her friend. "But thank you for the loan of the gown. It means that I can go to this ball feeling rather more confident than I would have."

Patricia waved a dismissive hand in the air. "It is my absolute pleasure! I brought at least ten evening gowns with me so I shall not miss it." She smiled slowly. "It suits you, Ruth. The cream goes so very well with your lovely pale complexion and your eyes look as blue as forget me nots."

Ruth swallowed a sudden lump that had formed in her throat. Patricia was always so kind to her. They had grown so close during this stay. Almost as close as sisters.

They had been at Sandhurst Hall for a week now. It had been exciting and nerve racking in equal measures. Their days were filled with walks through the gardens or the countryside.

Sometimes they took a small picnic with them. Once they had brought paper and charcoal and spent a morning sketching. It had been so much fun getting to know Patricia in such an informal way.

But that was only part of it, of course. The other part was trying to talk to the Earl and Lord Solton during stilted evenings in the parlour.

Or else having to suffer through stuffy dinner parties, like the one the odious Lady Buxton had attended. And tonight it was going to be one of the greatest trials of them all. A grand ball at a neighbouring estate.

Patricia had very kindly lent her the gown, when she had panicked about having nothing suitable for it. And she truly appreciated the kind gesture. But she also felt like she was being something she was not. She was just Miss Ruth Middleton, solicitor's daughter, from Cheapside. Would she be Cinderella and her dress turn to rags upon the stroke of midnight?

"Come along," said Patricia, pulling at her arm. "The carriage is waiting."

Ruth nodded. She glanced quickly back in the mirror. No, she didn't look like herself at all. And while she felt truly beautiful for the very first time in her life, she couldn't help feeling like an imposter. Again.

Ruth took a deep breath as they entered the house. It was not as imposing as Sandhurst Hall but it was still spectacular. The Earl had told her in the carriage on the way here that it belonged to his good friends Lord and Lady Lamberton.

There were at least a hundred people milling around, all dressed in their finest. The young ladies all stared openly at Patricia and Ruth as they slowly made their way through the crowd.

"Do not take any notice of them," whispered Patricia, behind her fan.

“They are country girls who notice anyone new to the district. That is all.”

Ruth nodded, feeling a little uncomfortable. She wasn't used to being the centre of attention like this at all. The very few balls she had attended in London had been grand affairs, too, but the crowd had been rather more sophisticated. And she had not been able to lend anyone's gown. She had to go in her own second rate gowns.

They reached the edge of the ballroom. There were several ladies and gentlemen dancing a quadrille. Ruth glanced back. She could just see Lord Solton, standing head and shoulders above the crowd. His raven black hair made him stand out, as well.

Her heart lurched slightly. He looked so handsome, in his dark blue velvet evening jacket. She had tried to avoid his eyes during the carriage ride here, but she had felt his gaze upon her, nonetheless. She didn't dare look back at him.

Would he think her an upstart, wearing a gown which so obviously didn't belong to her? But then, he didn't know that it wasn't hers, did he? It might be the one gown that her family had spent a small fortune upon. Patricia hadn't worn it yet during their stay.

Her face burnt. Of course, he would know that it didn't belong to her. It was way more elaborate than anything in her wardrobe, as well as being of far better quality. The beading on the bodice alone was probably worth more than her best evening gown.

Abruptly, she turned away. What did she care about his opinions of her gown? He probably didn't have any at all. Miss Ruth Middleton probably didn't even register in his mind, apart from being a mild

annoyance.

She frowned, thinking about him, as she gazed at the dancing. Lord Solton was a bit of an enigma. Cold and solemn, most of the time, with not much to say.

The first time he had really talked to her had been on that walk through the gardens the other day, when he had unexpectedly praised her pianoforte playing. But he had been as cold and withdrawn as always since.

A gentleman approached them, bowing. He addressed Patricia. "May I have the pleasure of this dance?"

Patricia smiled, extending her hand. "Of course."

They drifted off. Patricia smiled back at Ruth, who tried to smile encouragingly. But the truth was she felt adrift now that her only friend had left her. Her eyes filled with tears. She felt like everyone in that room knew that she was standing here alone.

She knew she was being ridiculous, of course. It was a ball and there would be dancing and socialising. She couldn't expect Patricia to cling like a limpet to her side for the entire evening.

Suddenly, the skin on the back of her neck started to prickle. Someone was standing right behind her. She swung around, almost colliding with Lord Solton.

“Oh,” she said breathlessly, hastily stepping back. “I do apologise! I did not see you there...”

He nodded. “It is quite alright, Miss Middleton. It is my fault entirely.” His eyes burnt like coals. “I was wondering if I might induce you to dance with me?”

Ruth’s jaw dropped. She couldn’t believe her ears.

“What...what did you say?” she stammered. “Did you just ask me to dance?”

“I believe that I did,” he said slowly, a small smile appearing on his face. It was one of the first times she had seen it. “That is if your dance card allows it, of course.”

Her eyes widened. “My dance card? Oh yes.” She knew she was blabbering like a fool, but she could not stop herself. “There is nothing on my dance card, I do assure you.”

“So,” he said, his smile widening. “Is that a yes, then?”

She nodded mutely. She couldn’t think of any valid reason to refuse him, after all. Before she knew it he had taken her hand and was leading her onto the dancefloor.

Her heart was racing wildly as she curtseyed to him. Then they were stepping towards each other, performing the intricate steps of the dance. Ruth was concentrating so hard on her feet that she didn't realise that he was as close as he was. Suddenly, she collided with him, almost knocking him over.

She heard laughter around her. Mortified, she quickly fled the dancefloor, her face burning bright scarlet. She had made a complete and utter fool of herself. She should have just refused him outright. He was far too intimidating, and it had made her even more nervous than she usually would have been. Oh, was there a more foolish girl in the world than her? She didn't think so.

But suddenly, there was a hand upon her arm, spinning her around. It was him. He didn't look angry with her. Rather, he looked bemused.

"Why did you take off like that?" he asked quickly.

"Why do you think?" she asked, without thinking. "Because I almost knocked you over. It was all too embarrassing!"

He smiled slowly. "There was no harm done, Miss Middleton. I am still in one piece, I do assure you." He gazed down at her steadily. "You seem a little overwhelmed. Do you require air, or may I get you a drink to refresh you?"

Ruth gazed at him in bewilderment. Why was he being nice to her, after what she had just done? Especially when he was usually so cold and distant. It didn't make any sense at all. But the truth was her mouth was very dry and a drink would be very welcome.

“Yes, a drink would be most refreshing,” she said, taking a deep breath.

“I will go and get you one,” he said curtly. “Stay here.”

And then he vanished into the crowd.

Ruth stared after him in dismay. She hadn’t realised he was going to go and fetch it for her. She had thought that they might find a footman with a tray together. She bit her lip, in an agony of confusion. She had made an utter fool of herself.

Suddenly, a young gentleman with dishevelled sandy coloured hair approached her, smiling slightly. “I say, are you friends with Miss Poldark? I saw the two of you talking together before.”

Ruth nodded. “Yes, I am staying with her at Sandhurst Hall.”

“Sandhurst Hall?” he repeated, his eyes widening. “You are friends with the old Earl, then? That is quite an accomplishment!”

Ruth frowned slightly. “I would not say that I am friends with him so much...”

“So how do you know Patricia?” he asked slowly. “I met her at a dance in London recently. Quite the socialite.” His eyes narrowed. “She was wearing that very dress.”

Ruth blushed scarlet. How could he have just said that to her? It was so terribly forward and rude. She gazed around desperately, wondering how she could make her escape. What were the chances that there would be someone at this ball who would recognise Patricia's gown? She wasn't even from this district.

"Carruthers." It was Lord Solton, with two drinks in hand. His dark eyes burnt like fire. "Are you pestering the young lady? That is not very good sport, old chap."

The gentleman glowered at him. "Solton. I was just introducing myself actually." He turned to Ruth. "Jack Carruthers, at your service, miss. Would you care for a dance?"

"No, she would not," glowered Lord Solton. "Away you go, Carruthers. Crawl back into your hole or wherever it is you came from."

Ruth watched them with astonishment. She was starting to feel a bit faint. Suddenly, she stumbled. Cursing under his breath, Lord Solton handed the drinks to a startled footman who was passing by, reaching for her arm.

"Come along, Miss Middleton," he rapped. "You are in need of air."

He guided her through the crowd, elbowing them out of the way. Ruth didn't glance back at the rude gentleman. All she wanted to do was sit down. It was all too much. She had barely been here for half an hour, and she had already made a fool of herself twice over, once by stumbling into Lord Solton, and then by wearing a gown that someone

recognised as not belonging to her.

She thought he would lead her to a chair in another room, but instead he marched her through the front door and towards the carriage.

“What...what are you doing?” she asked breathlessly.

They reached the carriage. Lord Solton opened the door.

“You should rest, Miss Middleton,” he said curtly. “You are obviously feeling faint, and the crowd is too much for you.” He paused, gazing at her steadily. “I shall instruct the carriage to return you to Sandhurst Hall and then come back. You will feel much better.”

Ruth gazed at him helplessly. He was deadly serious, and she could not contradict him. He was her host and she had obviously embarrassed him, as much as he had denied it. And he clearly didn't like that gentleman at all. Her eyes misting with tears, she climbed into the carriage. He shut the door behind her.

“Solton!” A man's voice, just behind him. “Are you leaving already? The night has barely begun!”

Lord Solton turned to the man. “Michelson. I am not leaving yet. I am merely assisting a lady who is a houseguest back to Sandhurst Hall. She is feeling poorly.” He turned back to Ruth. “Rest well, Miss Middleton. I shall see you on the morrow.” He spoke to the driver and the next thing she knew she was heading back down the driveway and through the gates.

The tears spilled over. She sobbed into her hands. She hadn't expected much from the night, but it had veered in such a strange direction that she could not fathom it at all.

Lord Solton would despise her now. He already thought her a foolish girl and had little time for her. He had been kind to her this evening, asking her to dance, and she had made an utter fool of him and herself. She supposed he had thought he had been doing her a favour by sending her back to Sandhurst Hall. She *had* been about to faint, after all.

She kept crying softly. It was all too humiliating. She should never have worn this dress. She should have just gone in one of her own gowns. At least then that appallingly rude man would never have approached her. This was what came of trying to be something that she wasn't. She had learnt her lesson, well and truly.

Hugh watched the carriage depart down the driveway. His fists clenched by his sides. He turned to the gentleman who had just spoken to him, as he had been settling Miss Middleton in the carriage.

"You look thunderous, Solton," said the man, raising his eyebrows. "Whatever is the matter?"

Hugh ran a hand through his hair. "I have just been dealing with that cad Carruthers," he said grimly. "He was harassing that young lady. She was so distressed she was about to faint."

The man chuckled. "Playing the knight errant, are we, Solton? That is decent of you. Carruthers is a notable cad. I would not want him anywhere near any lady in my close acquaintance."

Hugh kept watching the departing carriage as it disappeared through the tall gates, heading to Sandhurst Hall. Now that he had done it, he wasn't sure at all if it had been the right thing to do. Miss Middleton had seemed more distressed at being sent away from the ball than she had been in the house at the hands of Carruthers.

He sighed heavily. He had truly thought that it was the best course of action. Miss Middleton had appeared like a frightened fawn, unable to cope with the ball at all. First, she had collided with him while dancing and was devastated she had made a fool of herself. And then he had seen her pale, appalled face as Carruthers spoke to her. It had made him so angry that he had spoken more plainly to the cad than he normally would have.

But that had upset her, too. She had turned deathly white and stumbled, clearly about to faint. He had acted instinctively. The fierce urge to protect her and see her well had overwhelmed him. Even though she was from cosmopolitan London, she was an ingenue, only seventeen, and clearly not yet able to deal with socialising. He wondered why, with her timid, gentle nature, her parents had seen fit to launch her into society at all yet.

"No, indeed," he said slowly, turning back to the gentleman. "I wonder at the prudence of letting such young ladies loose at balls like these. There are so many rakes and cads around, searching for naïve girls to take advantage of." He exhaled slowly. "It seems to me that a young lady should not come into society until she is older and better able to navigate the waters."

The man smiled faintly. "There are always cads about, Solton. And it does not matter much what age a lady is. She must learn to recognise them and deflect them." He paused, gazing at Hugh carefully. "You are rather protective of that young lady. Who is she?"

"Miss Ruth Middleton," he replied. "A friend of Miss Patricia Poldark. The Poldark's are distant relations of ours."

The man nodded. "Yes, I know the Poldark's. They are a fine upstanding family. But I have never heard of Miss Ruth Middleton. Where are her family from?"

Hugh gazed at the man. He knew that if he told Michelson the truth of Ruth's background, the man would dismiss her instantly, as unworthy of consideration. He would wonder why Hugh had taken such pains to protect her. Another wave of anger swept over him. Ruth was worth protecting regardless of her background.

Ruth was worth more than a hundred high born ladies. And that was the truth of it.

"London," he replied vaguely. "It was good to see you, Michelson. But I must return to the ball to supervise Miss Poldark. I would not wish to have her vulnerable to the likes of Carruthers either."

He strode off. He needed a stiff drink after all of that. And the truth was, while he would keep an eye on Miss Poldark, he simply did not feel the same way about protecting her as he did about Miss Middleton. And that was another truth.

He tried to dismiss it. But it persisted. His feelings towards the young lady he had just sent off were conflicted. But they were also strong. He could not make head nor tail of them.

He took a deep breath as he entered the house. Ruth was gone. She had been the most beautiful lady here this evening. It was as if a light had suddenly gone out of the house. His heart heaved with the most bitter disappointment. And he couldn't understand that at all, either.

Chapter 6

The next morning, still sitting at the dressing table after the maid had left, Ruth felt as dispirited and low as she had the evening before. She had been sent away from the ball as if she was a silly child. It still stung, that Lord Solton had thought it necessary. That she had made such a complete fool of herself.

The door suddenly burst open. Patricia stood there, already dressed for the day. Her face was luminous.

“Patricia,” said Ruth, trying to smile. “You are up and about early.”

Ruth watched as Patricia quickly entered the room. She hadn’t seen her friend at all since she had been sent off from the ball. She was expecting Patricia to launch into questions about her sudden absence, but instead her friend sat down on the edge of her bed, gazing dreamily out the window, and said nothing at all.

“You seem distracted,” said Ruth, turning around to face her. “Did you have a good evening at the ball?”

Patricia nodded. Her eyes were alight. “Indeed, I did, Ruth. My dance card was full.” She hesitated. “And then there was Lord Solton.”

Ruth’s heart flipped over in her chest. “Lord Solton? What of him?”

Patricia smiled slowly. "It was strange indeed. But he never left my side for the entire evening. When I was not dancing, of course." She paused, looking coy. "I thought he did not like me at all. He is always so stiff and pompous. But last evening something changed. It is most inexplicable."

Ruth kept staring at her friend. For some strange reason, she didn't like what she was saying at all. Or what she thought she was saying.

Patricia sighed. "He is so very handsome, is he not? That tall, commanding figure. That black hair and those dark eyes. He is rather stuffy, to be sure, but perhaps I have judged him too soon." Her eyes grew contemplative. "He would make a truly excellent suitor, Ruth. He will be the Earl of Montbatten one day. And our blood ties are so remote as to make no difference at all. He is not a first or even a second cousin."

Ruth forced a smile onto her face. "It would not matter even if your blood ties were closer, Patricia. Many in the aristocracy marry first cousins to keep the bloodline pure." She couldn't keep the note of disdain out of her voice.

But Patricia either didn't hear it or chose to ignore it. "It would be a very advantageous match," she said thoughtfully. "My father would *definitely* approve. And I would lead a very comfortable life indeed. Why, I would be the countess one day, and all of this grand estate would be mine!"

Ruth's heart lurched. Tears stung behind her eyes. Hastily, she turned back to the dressing table, so Patricia didn't see them. She was astonished at her own strong reaction to her friend's words.

“Is that all it is?” asked Ruth, trying to control the tremor in her voice. “The fact that you would be a countess one day? Do you admire him as a man at all?”

Ruth could see Patricia in the mirror. Her friend was contemplating her question. And that fact alone told her all she needed to know. If Patricia truly admired and liked Lord Solton, then she would have responded immediately and probably fervently. But Patricia was biding her time.

“I could learn to admire him,” said Patricia pensively. “He has been so stiff and cold up until now that I dismissed him entirely. I thought him indifferent to me. But his sudden warmth towards me last evening changes everything.” She took a deep breath. “It is my duty to encourage such a gentleman if he shows preference towards me, after all.”

Ruth turned around again, staring at her. “I thought that you told me that you wished to marry for love. That day at your afternoon tea party you said that is what you desire most in the world.”

Patricia looked surprised, and a little mortified. “Well, that would be ideal, of course. But perhaps I shall never find true love.” Her face twisted. “Perhaps it can never happen that way for me, for a variety of reasons. Does that mean I should never marry? That I should become an old maid?”

Ruth gaped at her. “You are only eighteen, Patricia. You have only just made your debut. There is all the time in the world to find a gentleman you truly admire and love. Why do you think now you need to rush it?”

Patricia turned her face away, towards the wall. "I have my reasons. And an opportunity has presented itself. I would be a fool to ignore it. The Viscount is titled, wealthy and one of the most eligible bachelors in the land." She exhaled slowly, turning back to face Ruth. "I think it would be advantageous to encourage him and so I shall."

Ruth's heart flipped over again. "Well, if that is what you think..."

"It is." Patricia's voice was suddenly hard. "It is the way of the world, Ruth, and we must all resolve ourselves to it eventually. Perhaps coming to Sandhurst Hall has been a brilliant move in more ways than one."

Ruth nodded. What else could she do?

Patricia smiled suddenly. "And what of you, dearest? Lord Solton told me that you left early last night because you were feeling ill. Are you quite recovered?"

Ruth forced a smile onto her face. "I am quite well now, I thank you. It was rather too stuffy and crowded in that house. I felt very faint, and Lord Solton kindly assisted me."

Patricia nodded absently. She didn't seem inclined to question Ruth any further about it. And for some reason, Ruth didn't want to tell her friend exactly what had occurred—the true reasons she had left that ball last night. It was rather surprising and more than a little vexing. She and Patricia had grown so close, and she had been wanting to confide in her friend prior to her startling announcement.

But Patricia seemed different. She was elated but also oddly distant, almost secretive. Ruth was so used to her friend being open, warm and genuine that it was quite a shock. But then, how well did she know Miss Patricia Poldark anyway? They had been friends for only a few weeks, after all.

It was all so odd, she thought, frowning slightly. Things had veered in an unexpected direction. And the strangest part of it all was her reaction to Patricia's announcement. She couldn't figure it out at all. What did she care if Patricia set her cap at Lord Solton? It was simply none of her business.

Hugh walked into the dining room. His father was sitting at the head of the table, carefully slicing the top off a boiled egg. He balked. Both young ladies were already seated at the breakfast table as well. He hadn't expected that.

"Hugh!" cried his father, looking jovial. "There you are. I was just talking to the young ladies about the ball last night." He frowned slightly. "Poor Miss Middleton missed most of it, because of her sudden illness, which is a shame."

Hugh nodded, sitting down, spreading his napkin on his lap. He couldn't resist glancing at Ruth. She looked well enough. The colour had returned to her face, and she was composed, sipping her tea.

"How are you feeling today, Miss Middleton?" he asked slowly. "Are you quite recovered?"

“Indeed I am, My Lord,” she replied crisply, raising her chin, but not quite meeting his eye. “Thank you for your kind assistance last night. It was very much appreciated.”

He frowned. She seemed so self-possessed, almost distant. The emotional girl of the previous evening was nowhere to be seen. And while he did not wish for her to be in the grip of such paroxysms, it was also more than a little unsettling to see her like this. She still wouldn't look at him directly. Perhaps she was just still embarrassed.

“It was a grand affair, was it not?” said the Earl, smiling. “The Lamberton's outdid themselves! More than a hundred people in attendance.”

“Yes, it was a success,” said Hugh absently, still staring at Ruth. “I am sure they will think it money well spent.”

“How are you today, My Lord?” asked Miss Poldark, gazing at him warmly.

Hugh smiled. “Very well, I thank you, Miss Poldark. A trifle tired, but that is to be expected after such a late night.”

“I was wondering if you would like to take a walk today,” she continued, smiling brightly. “It is another glorious summer's day and it might clear both our heads after all that champagne last night.”

Hugh hesitated. He really shouldn't. The danger of being too close to Ruth was paramount in his mind. And yet, the lure of spending time

with her was irresistible. Perhaps he might get a chance to speak with her alone and reassure her that he did not judge her about last night. Perhaps she might gaze upon him sweetly again.

“That would be excellent, Miss Poldark,” he said slowly, trying not to look at Ruth as he spoke. “Perhaps this morning? I have an engagement in the village this afternoon.”

She nodded. “This morning it is!” She turned to Ruth. “I think perhaps a long walk would be too much for you today, dearest. You were unwell last evening, after all. Perhaps you should rest, while Lord Solton and I go on our walk?”

Hugh gaped at the lady. He hadn’t seen that coming at all. Was she manoeuvring the situation so she could be alone with him? He was just about to say that Miss Middleton seemed quite recovered and of course should accompany them when Ruth spoke out.

“That suits me very well, Patricia,” she said, taking a sip of tea. “While I am feeling well now it might change. I *was* quite overcome last evening.” She suddenly turned and stared at Hugh. “I hope that you enjoy the walk, My Lord.”

He nodded, staring down at his still empty plate. He was utterly bamboozled. He didn’t want to go on a walk if she wasn’t there. But he had already said yes, and he couldn’t back out of it now.

“Perfect,” said Miss Poldark, in a satisfied voice. “I shall make sure I am ready as soon as breakfast is over.”

There was an awkward silence. Hugh took his plate, helping himself to ham, eggs and sausage from the dishes in the middle of the table. His appetite seemed to have vanished suddenly, but it kept him busy while he thought through what had just occurred.

It was obvious that the attention he had paid to Miss Poldark at the ball after Ruth had left was backfiring. He had spent more time with her than he had anticipated, just because he had seen Carruthers and one or two other cads circling her. And in the interests of fairness—and perhaps because he was still trying to deny his feelings towards Ruth—he had made it his duty to be her protector.

But Miss Poldark clearly thought something else. She must believe he was interested in her and admired her. There could be no other explanation for her insisting they take a walk without Ruth. He didn't think for a moment that Miss Poldark was being protective of her friend. Ruth had said she was feeling fine.

He sighed heavily, picking up his knife and fork. This was all getting rather too complicated for his liking. Once again, he rued the fact his father had invited these young ladies to stay with them indefinitely. It was all swerving in the most unexpected of ways. And he was still as confused as ever about it all.

He glanced at Ruth. She was quietly eating her breakfast and did not look put out at all by being dismissed from the walk. He wished she would look at him. But she didn't. The rest of the meal was concluded in silence, before she excused herself, saying she would rest.

He watched her leaving the room. His heart was inexplicably heavy.

Ruth sat embroidering in the parlour, her mind very far away. It was late afternoon. Patricia was resting in her chambers before dinner. The Earl was in his study, as always. And Lord Solton had left for his afternoon engagement hours ago and had not yet returned, as far as she could tell.

She cried out softly as she pricked her finger with the needle. She tossed the embroidery patch aside. She couldn't concentrate on it at all. All she could think about was Patricia and Lord Solton and what had happened on that morning walk they had taken, with the housekeeper as chaperone. The morning walk she had been excluded from by her friend.

Her eyes filled with tears. Patricia had looked smug after they returned but had not said anything about it to her. Lord Solton hadn't attended luncheon at all, instead ordering the carriage and taking off for the afternoon. What had happened between them? Had an understanding been reached? And why, for the love of God, did she care so much?

Restless, she got up, walking to the window to gaze out. She should be happy for her friend and encouraging her. She knew that. But it hurt in some way that she could not understand. The fact that Lord Solton was so suddenly interested in Patricia confounded her.

She took a deep, ragged breath, probing her feelings. Dear Lord, was she *jealous*?

Suddenly, she saw the carriage hurtling across the moat towards the house. It pulled up at the front entrance. She watched Lord Solton get out. He looked distracted. And then, to her horror, he glanced at the

drawing room window, seeing her staring at him.

Hastily, she dropped the curtain, her heart pounding. She had to get out of this room and retreat to her chambers. She walked swiftly to retrieve her embroidery patch. She was almost out of the door when he suddenly loomed in front of her, blocking her way.

He stared at her grimly. "Miss Middleton. I trust you are well rested."

She swallowed a painful lump in her throat. "Yes, I thank you." She took a deep breath. "I should return to my chambers to dress for dinner."

She expected him to move aside, but he didn't. He just stood there, like an immovable tree, blocking her way. It would be rude to brush past him but how could she endure speaking to him when she felt so strangely?

"Yes," he said slowly. But he still didn't move. "I...I must apologise for sending you off so hastily last evening. I hope that you did not think me overly presumptuous. I was just so very concerned for your welfare..."

Ruth shivered. He was standing so very close to her. The proximity was disturbing, in a way that she had never felt before. Last evening when he had danced with her and stood near her, she had been so overwhelmed with her nerves she hadn't felt anything but panic. But now...now, it was different.

She studied his face covertly. He had a strong jawline and a patrician

nose. His eyes, so dark they were almost black, seemed to burn into her soul. She had never noticed how long his eyelashes were, nor the peculiar sweep of his eyebrows. There was no denying how handsome he was, nor how commanding his presence.

“You do not need to apologise,” she said breathlessly. “You were right to do what you did. I was overwhelmed.” Her heart flipped over in her chest. “It is I who should apologise again, for all the trouble I caused you.”

“It was no trouble,” he said slowly. “In fact, it was a pleasure to assist you, in any way that I could.”

She nodded, trying desperately to breathe. She had to get away from him. This was most alarming, and she did not understand it at all.

“If you would excuse me,” she said desperately. “I truly must get to my chambers for fear of being late for dinner...”

“Of course,” he said hastily, standing aside. “I should start dressing for dinner myself. My engagement went longer than I anticipated.”

She smiled tremulously, brushing past him. Somehow, their hands connected. She jumped as if she had been scalded. Blushing fiercely, she walked quickly away, down the hallway towards the staircase.

She ran up them, taking two at a time, as if the very hounds of hell were on her tail. At the top of the stairs she stopped, glancing back. She didn’t know why she did it—only that she was compelled.

He was still standing at the drawing room door. And he was watching her. He wasn't smiling. Instead, he had an intense look upon his face. She was so used to him looking cold and distant that it was a shock. For some reason, she had thought him incapable of strong emotion at all. He was usually so very self-contained.

She flexed her hand where he had briefly touched her. It felt like a thousand sparks shooting through her flesh. She had never felt anything like it. Confused, she turned away, her heart pounding hard in her chest. She ran down the hallway and into her chambers, closing the door firmly behind her.

She leant heavily against the door, trying to gain her breathe again. Her stomach was churning into knots and her hand was still tingling. What was happening to her? It felt very much like the beginning of a sickness, but she knew it wasn't that.

She walked slowly into the room, collapsing across the bed. She knew she only had a brief time alone. Bessie the maid would be knocking at her door very soon to dress her for dinner.

She took a deep breath, trying to make sense of her emotions, and these alarming sensations that were coursing through her body. She knew that she was no longer indifferent to Lord Solton. Very far from it.

She rolled over, staring at the wall. Why had he insisted on approaching her alone? It was gentlemanly of him to apologise, but she knew instinctively it hadn't been about that. It had appeared like he wanted to be close to her, but she knew that was ludicrous.

Ruth sighed heavily. It was ridiculous, too, to indulge these alarming feelings towards him. Apart from the fact she was poor and obscure, and it would be useless to form an attachment towards him, there was Patricia. Her friend had suddenly and inexplicably decided that she wished to pursue the Viscount.

She frowned. Regardless of how he truly felt about Patricia, the fact remained that her friend was serious in her endeavour. And she would not take kindly to Ruth being partial to him at all.

It would become like some kind of competition between them and that was the last thing on earth she wanted. Patricia had been so very kind and generous to her. She couldn't hurt her. She *wouldn't* hurt her.

She suddenly laughed. She was being ridiculous. Lord Solton didn't admire her in any way. She was seeing things that simply were not there. Just because he had been protective of her last night meant nothing. And even if he *did* admire her, even in the smallest of ways, it could lead nowhere. He was a viscount and would one day be an earl. She was the daughter of a solicitor from Cheapside. They were as far apart from each other as the moon from the earth.

She sat up slowly. She *must* get these feelings under control, for everyone's sake. No one must guess how she truly felt about Lord Solton. It was probably just an infatuation anyway. She had heard about such things but had never experienced it before. She was inexperienced with the ways of the world, as green as the grass. It would pass. It *must* pass.

And yet...she could not get the vision of him out of her mind, as he had appeared in the doorway. Those dark eyes burning into her own. The way he had looked at her. His soft words of apology. The brushing of their hands as she had walked past him. Could there be

something strong and real between them? Did he feel the same way?

She bit her lip. Even if it was real, it did not matter. All the barriers between them were real as well. And they could not be overcome. She blinked back tears. How she wished she had never come to Sandhurst Hall. She had been expecting scorn and indifference, but she had encountered something very different indeed.

And she didn't know how to handle it at all.

Chapter 7

Ruth's stomach was churning as she walked towards the stables. Today, Patricia had declared that they were going horse riding. It was the first time she had suggested it since London, and Ruth had hoped that perhaps her friend might have forgotten all about it. But her luck had finally run out.

She glanced sideways at Lord Solton, who was walking alongside them. Of course, Patricia had invited him along. Ruth had hoped he might decline, but he had accepted, in that sombre way he had. He looked particularly tall and commanding in his smart black riding apparel. Aunt Clementine walked alongside him, staring around absently, as she always did.

Her stomach twisted with nerves again. She wasn't a horsewoman in any way. She could count on one hand the number of times she had been on the back of a horse. She knew the basic skills, but she was sorely lacking in practise. Worse than that, horses frightened her. She was about to make an utter fool of herself again. She just knew it.

She took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. If she had been going riding with just Patricia and her aunt, it wouldn't have mattered as much. She could have awkwardly laughed it off. But with Lord Solton in attendance, watching her every move, she felt so very self-conscious. She just knew that he would be an excellent rider. So would Patricia and her aunt. They were all from the upper classes and riding was in their blood.

They were almost to the stables when Lord Solton turned to her. "Have you much experience with horses, Miss Middleton?"

She trembled anew underneath his penetrating gaze. She couldn't lie about it and nor did she want to. If she claimed she was a skilled equestrian she would be sorely out of her depth and make an even bigger fool of herself. It was best to be totally honest with him.

"I do not, My Lord," she said slowly, her heart racing. "I have limited skills. I have very little confidence at all."

He frowned slightly. "But you *do* know how to ride at least?"

She nodded uncertainly. "I know the basic skills. I can stay atop the horse and am able to direct it. But I have never progressed beyond a basic canter. I cannot lead the horse to a gallop." She blushed fiercely. "Perhaps it would be best if I do not attend this excursion..."

"Nonsense," he said briskly. "You will never progress if you do not practise. But I am glad you were honest with me. I shall choose a very tame and gentle horse for you so that you feel comfortable."

Ruth nodded gratefully. Their eyes met and held for slightly longer than necessary. Her blush deepened, remembering their recent encounter when their hands had accidentally met. The feelings he had aroused within her leapt to life again. Mortified, she turned hastily away.

Within ten minutes, they were all atop their chosen horses and heading out of the estate, down a country lane. Lord Solton rode an enormous black stallion with a silky coat. Patricia had chosen a slightly smaller chestnut mare and Aunt Clementine's horse was grey. Ruth stared at the head of the horse he had chosen for her. It was a small white and brown dappled horse with a long, swishing tail that

he had assured her was quite tame.

Her heart was still racing, and she gripped the reins tightly as they continued. The horse *was* gentle natured and seemed to be obeying her, despite her obvious nerves. She knew that horses could sense agitation or anxiety in their rider, but this beast was thankfully choosing to ignore it.

At the end of the lane, they veered through a gate and started riding through a vast, green field. The others surged ahead of her, even Aunt Clementine, obviously enjoying stretching the legs of their horses. Ruth lagged behind, trying to keep up as best as she could. The only thing that mattered to her now was keeping on top of her horse and she didn't much care if the others galloped away.

After a while, she started to relax, just a little. The day was glorious, as all the days had been during their stay at Sandhurst Hall. It was a truly beautiful summer. The sky was a pure blue dome above her, the sun a dazzling orb of gold, and the fields verdantly green. There were wildflowers scattered here and there. It was splendid countryside.

Ruth had always loved being out in nature and rarely got the chance, living in the city, besides going to parks. So, this was a special treat. She filled her lungs with the fresh country air, feeling the sun upon her face and the breeze lifting the curls which framed her face. For a while she forgot everything. All her worries vanished as she relished the experience.

Suddenly, she saw the others in the distance. They had stopped and dismounted near a tall oak tree. She ambled towards them, trying to pull up the horse, as she got closer. Lord Solton walked slowly towards her, taking the horses reins and helping her to dismount.

“Well done, Miss Middleton,” he said gravely. “You will make an equestrian yet.”

She blushed fiercely. “I fear you are teasing me, Lord Solton!”

“Of course, he is,” smiled Patricia, joining them. “But you *have* done very well, Ruth.”

Ruth smiled at her friend. “Thank you. Why have we stopped?”

“There is a splendid view from the top of this hill,” said Lord Solton. “I thought you might all appreciate it before we continue on.”

Ruth nodded. They all followed him to the top of the hill, gazing out. The landscape dipped dramatically into a valley. Ruth gasped. It *was* beautiful. She saw a quaint village nestled within it. Beyond that there were more rolling green hills.

“This is one of my favourite spots,” said Lord Solton. “I often come riding here when I have the chance.”

“I can see why,” enthused Patricia, taking a deep breath. “If I lived in this district, I would be riding here all the time as well!” She turned to him. “How lucky you are, Lord Solton. A magnificent home and all this splendour at your doorstep. It quite makes me wish to live in this area permanently.”

He nodded gravely. "Perhaps you shall one day, Miss Poldark. One never knows where the path of life shall take us."

Patricia looked slightly smug. Ruth's heart contracted. Her friend obviously thought that Lord Solton was hinting that perhaps she might stay here with him. But Ruth didn't think he was hinting at that at all. He was merely being polite, in his distant way.

She took a deep breath, trying to quieten her misgivings. Patricia was trying her hardest to establish an intimacy with him, but he didn't seem to be biting. Ruth had no impression that he admired her friend in that way, despite Patricia's insistence that he did like her since the ball.

"Shall we keep riding?" he asked.

They all nodded. Within minutes they were mounted and heading back through the field. The others galloped ahead, and Ruth lagged behind. But she didn't care at all. If she could manage to get back to Sandhurst Manor without incident, then she didn't mind being the slowest rider. Let them enjoy their ride.

She was almost back to the country lane when a hare scuttled along the path of her horse. It was so quick that Ruth barely saw it. But her horse did. It stopped so suddenly that she almost went flying over the top of its head. She gripped the reins fiercely, holding on for dear life, her heart pounding hard.

The horse stood still, refusing to budge, despite all her encouragement. Ruth felt beads of sweat trickling down her neck. She supposed she should be grateful that she hadn't been thrown entirely, but this was tricky. She simply had no idea how to get a horse moving again when it was being obstinate.

"Come on, girl," she said loudly, kicking ineffectually. "Come on!"

There was nothing. The horse swished its tail and moved its ears but would not move. Ruth glanced anxiously around. The others had already headed down the lane and vanished entirely from her sight. She was stuck here, trying to get this horse to move. And the more she tried, the less confident she became.

Suddenly, Lord Solton reappeared, galloping towards her. He pulled up alongside, frowning.

"What is it?" he called. "Why are you not riding?"

Ruth smiled awkwardly. "I am afraid I cannot get the horse to move. It was startled by a hare and refuses to obey any of my commands..."

"Kick her," he said. "Do it in a forthright manner. She needs to know who is in charge."

Ruth coloured, doing as he said. It was even worse now because he was watching her. But no matter how hard she tried the horse ignored her. Her colour deepened. This was extremely embarrassing, and she simply did not know how to solve the situation.

With an irritated sigh, Lord Solton dismounted. He walked up to her, reaching his hands up.

“You should dismount,” he said curtly. “You can ride with me back to the house and I will lead your horse by the reins.”

Mortified, she obeyed, sliding to the ground. Within minutes, he had her on top of his own horse, sitting behind her. He took the reins of her horse, forcing it to move, and they all started towards the lane.

Ruth hung her head. She was so terribly embarrassed that he had to save her. But even worse was the feel of his arms around her as he held the reins. The movement of the horse underneath kept jolting her into his back and she felt his warm breath upon the nape of her neck. She shivered as those strange, alarming feelings that she had felt the other day surged to life once more.

He didn't say a thing to her. He was stiff and she knew that his mouth was probably pursed in disapproval. Once again, she was proving what a silly, ineffectual girl she was. The shame of it intensified as she remembered her mortification when he had sent her away from the ball.

“I must apologise,” she said stiffly. “It seems you are always saving me in one way or the other. And you obviously do not find it a pleasant task.” She paused, her eyes filling with helpless tears. “It is obvious you find me entirely disagreeable.”

He didn't say anything for a minute. Ruth's heart lurched uncomfortably. She knew she was speaking out of turn, but she simply

could not control herself any longer.

“I am sorry you feel that way,” he said eventually, his breath still on her neck. “It is not true at all. I do not find you disagreeable in the least, Miss Middleton. Why would you think so?”

Ruth held the tears at bay with difficulty. “Because of the way you sent me away from the ball, as if I was just a foolish child,” she shot back. “It was embarrassing in the extreme. You did not even ask me what I wanted to do. I know that I was overcome with emotion but if I had simply sat down for a while, I may have been able to return to the ball.”

He didn’t say anything. She felt another stab of anger.

“And the way you have acted now,” she continued, unable to keep the hurt from her voice. “I told you I was inexperienced at horse riding, but you act irritated that I could not get my horse moving, as if you must take over because I am incapable of it.”

She glanced at him over her shoulder. His face was so close she could see the dark whiskers beneath his chin and the sweep of his dark eyelashes. She was struck once again by how handsome he was.

He smiled faintly. “You *did* need assistance with the horse,” he replied. “As for what happened at the ball, I thought it best at the time that you leave the ball entirely.” He paused, gazing at her intently. “But I do apologise if you thought me heavy handed and not mindful of your feelings, Miss Middleton. I repeat, I do not find you disagreeable. Very far from it.”

She exhaled slowly. Her abrupt anger was seeping away. Perhaps he was only being polite in saying he did not find her disagreeable. But it was nice to hear him say it, nonetheless. Very nice indeed.

“Sandhurst Hall is like a sanctuary for me,” he continued slowly. “A retreat from the world and being around people. I was put out when my father informed me that he had invited you and Miss Poldark to stay indefinitely. But that has nothing to do with you at all. In fact, I am glad now that he extended the invitation. More than I can say.”

Ruth blushed, turning back to the front. She didn't know what he meant by that comment. Perhaps he was referring to Patricia's presence, without actually saying it. It was ludicrous to think he might be referring to her.

She had become so absorbed in the exchange, that she hadn't realised they were already back at the house. They headed towards the stables, where Patricia and Aunt Clementine had already dismounted and were waiting.

Ruth tried to put the strange exchange behind her. She had lost her temper briefly, but he hadn't turned churlish with her. She supposed she should be grateful for that at least. It was far harder to forget the feel of being so close to him upon the horse. She blushed fiercely, wondering what the solemn and proper Lord Solton would think if he knew how she was thinking about him.

Hugh watched the trio of ladies depart the stables, walking back to the house. He had bid them farewell, telling them that he wanted to

talk to the stable master. But it had only been an excuse to be by himself. As soon as they disappeared into the house he walked off, heading down the garden path. His mind was whirring like cogs on a wheel.

I am in danger. I am growing more attracted to her with every passing day.

He sat down on a bench, gazing into the garden. He knew, of course, that he shouldn't have accepted Miss Poldark's invitation to go riding with them. But, like the fool he was, he couldn't say no. The thought of being close to Ruth Middleton was becoming irresistible.

He sighed heavily, his hands balling into fists. It would not do. He must stop indulging himself. She was completely unsuitable to court. Her background and lack of connections made it thus. Ruth Middleton might be the most charming and beautiful young lady he had ever encountered but it made no difference.

His mind started sparking in all directions. The feel of her against him on the horse with her back pressed into him. He could smell her faint perfume. He had not been able to stop staring at her neck, tracing the lines of it with his eyes. The way that her hair curled at the nape of her neck. It was so bewitching he could barely concentrate on his riding.

He stirred, feeling his blood quicken. He wanted her—there was no denying it. But he had never been a rake, taking his pleasure where he found it, not caring about the heart or reputation of the lady.

He knew many gentlemen who had no such scruples, but he prided himself on the fact that he wasn't one of them. He had always made it a rule that if he could not openly court a lady with a view towards

marriage then he would not pursue her.

Ruth Middleton was making that rule very hard to stick to indeed.

He stood up abruptly, walking back to the house. How he wished it was different—that Miss Middleton had the background and connections of Miss Poldark. For a moment he regretted the fact that it *wasn't* Miss Poldark he was enamoured with. It would be so much easier if that was the case.

He knew that sometimes gentlemen married below their class. But it was different for him. He would be an earl one day. It was one of the loftiest titles in the land and it had been drilled into him since boyhood that he must marry well.

His future wife must be superior in every way. A good bloodline, connections, and preferably wealth as well, to add to the coffers. It was just the way that things were done in his world.

He sighed again, trying to ignore the heat in his blood. He was afire for her. He had tried to ignore it and rationalise it, but there was no denying it now. He must tread very carefully from now on. But he knew, as he entered the house, that he would probably ignore his own entreaties to himself. Ruth Middleton had entered his blood now and there seemed no way to get her out at all.

Ruth stood behind Patricia as she sat at her dressing table, hastily tucking curls behind her ears. They had left Aunt Clementine in the

parlour to her knitting. Patricia had insisted Ruth talk with her in her chambers. And now, the smug smile Patricia had been wearing on the hillside had returned as she gazed at herself in the mirror.

Ruth stared at her. Patricia was completely absorbed in her reflection. She was dismayed at how different her friend was now, since she had decided to encourage Lord Solton. She hadn't even asked Ruth what had happened during the ride—why she had been unable to ride her own horse back to the house. Instead, she was determined to talk about Lord Solton and his supposed admiration for her and nothing else mattered.

“I think I am making progress,” said Patricia thoughtfully. “The more time we spend together the more I sense how much he likes me! I am simply determined to find more occasions to talk with him.” She suddenly stared at Ruth in the mirror. “What do you think, dearest? He was rather attentive to me today, was he not?”

Ruth sighed but nodded. What else could she do? She could hardly tell her friend that she thought Lord Solton was indifferent to her. Besides the fact that she didn't really know anyway. It would crush Patricia and she had no desire to see her friend in low spirits, even if she didn't think she was in any danger of having her heart broken.

Patricia had decided to attach herself to the idea of marrying Lord Solton and nothing could dissuade it.

Patricia's eyes were glittering fiercely. She almost looked feverish, thought Ruth. As if she were possessed. But once again, Ruth had the overwhelming impression that it was not because of a warm regard for the man. She truly didn't think Patricia admired him that much at all. She was as indifferent to him as he was to her.

It was a mystery. Why had her friend decided to pursue this course so abruptly, when she had been adamant in London that she wished to marry for love?

Ruth sighed again. It was all becoming very complicated. She was developing feelings for Lord Solton, but it was Patricia who was determined to marry him. And who knew how the man himself thought or felt? He was as inaccessible to her as ever. A man with hidden depths that she could never hope to know.

Chapter 8

At the breakfast table the next day, it was Aunt Clementine who suggested a morning walk. Ruth braced herself. She knew that Patricia would inevitably ask Lord Solton if he wished to accompany them. Or perhaps, she would turn to Ruth and politely ask her not to attend again?

But if that had been on Patricia's mind, then she quickly dismissed it. "That sounds splendid, Aunt! Are you eager to go, Ruth?"

Ruth nodded slowly. She supposed Patricia could only ask her not to go with them so many times, after all. Especially if Aunt Clementine had to attend as chaperone.

Patricia turned her brilliant smile to Lord Solton. "Would you care to join us, Lord Solton, if you are not busy?"

He hesitated; his teacup suspended in the air. Ruth tensed, waiting for his answer. He considered the request for a long time, staring down at the table. But then he quickly nodded.

"May I make a suggestion?" he asked slowly. "There are some castle ruins within a short distance of Sandhurst Hall. It is a lovely walk to them. Would you like me to show you?"

Patricia clapped her hands together in delight. "Oh, yes! I love ruins! So romantic!" She smiled widely at him.

He coughed into his hand. "Yes, well, they are a favoured destination in the district. People come from miles to see them. I can tell you the history of the castle when we are there." He turned to the Earl. "Would you like to accompany us as well, Father?"

The Earl shook his head quickly. "History bores me, I am afraid! And I have seen those ruins too many times to count. I shall leave you all to your walk and wish you well of it."

Ruth picked up her teacup, sipping thoughtfully as she gazed out the long window. It looked like another glorious day. Her heart quickened, at the thought of walking alongside him and seeing the castle ruins. She had never even been to a castle before. It *did* seem incredibly romantic, just as Patricia had said.

But as soon as the thought entered her mind, her heart flipped in sorrow. It might be a romantic excursion, but she had no right to think along those lines. Especially not about Lord Solton. For the umpteenth time, she wished she could return to indifference about him. Where had these odd, inexplicable feelings arisen from? And how on earth could she stop them?

They set out just before luncheon. Patricia, in her excitement, suggested a picnic amongst the ruins. Lord Solton had agreed, sending for a basket of goodies from the kitchen. He held the brown wicker basket as they followed him out of the estate and into a field.

Ruth twirled her parasol as she gazed around in wonder. She hadn't

been on this particular walk before. It was more ruggedly beautiful. There were lots of weeping willow trees and fields of wild daffodils. She almost felt like she was entering a dreamscape.

They walked for over ten minutes, before Lord Solton abruptly stopped, pointing into the distance.

“There it is,” he said slowly. “The ruins of a once great castle.”

Ruth stared in the direction. This far away it looked like a pile of large grey stones. But one high wall and tower were still standing. She felt a stab of excitement. It would be wonderful to explore it.

“What was the name of the castle?” asked Patricia.

“Eastwick Castle,” he replied. “I shall tell you more about it once we get there.”

They kept on, walking through a field of daffodils, until they reached it. Once there they set the picnic up. Ruth, Patricia and Aunt Clementine settled upon the rug. Lord Solton chose to sit a short distance away on a large grey stone.

There was pork pie and chicken sandwiches, followed by slices of hummingbird cake. The cook had packed a bottle of lemonade as well. A soft breeze drifted around Ruth as she ate, carrying dandelions in the air. It was truly magical. Suddenly, she heard a low rumble of thunder in the distance.

“The weather might be changing,” said Aunt Clementine, frowning as she munched on a sandwich. “A storm may be brewing.”

“It should pass,” said Lord Solton, gazing into the distance. “Summer storms are not common in this area but when they do arrive, they usually blow over quickly.”

Aunt Clementine harrumphed but did not contradict him.

When the picnic was done, they started exploring. Lord Solton led them through the ruins, talking as he went.

“Eastwick Castle was built in Norman times,” he said. “It was once the grandest castle in this area. I think a king or two came to stay in its time. But after the War of the Roses, it was left in ruins. The noble family that owned it were defeated and never regained their fortune. The castle was left to the elements.”

Patricia smiled. “Such a romantic tale.” She passed a hand over one large slab of stone. “I wonder what these stones would say if they could talk. What tales they could tell us.”

“It would probably be tales of murder and mayhem,” said Lord Solton dryly. “There was a lot of that in those times. It was not a very secure way to live at all. I think we are very lucky that we do not have to endure civic unrest and war any longer.”

Ruth walked into a large, vaulted area. There was only the frame remaining. “I wonder what this was?”

Lord Solton came close, gazing up. "I would say it was the chapel. All castles had one." He smiled at her. "This was where the family and household would come for prayers and mass."

"A welcome respite from all that murder and mayhem," said Ruth, smiling as she pictured people from centuries ago sitting and kneeling here in prayer.

"Indeed," said Lord Solton, his smile widening. "The castle inhabitants would have fled here as well, claiming sanctuary when they were invaded."

"Of course," said Ruth, gazing at him. "That happened a lot in those times, did it not? I seem to recall reading once that Elizabeth Woodville, the wife of King Edward the Sixth, sought church sanctuary with her children when their castle was invaded, protecting her sons from certain murder."

Lord Solton stared at her. "You like history, Miss Middleton?"

Ruth turned pink. "I do. My father fancies himself as an amateur historian and he has passed his obsession along to me I am afraid." She paused, feeling a little embarrassed. "We are always reading historical books of an evening. We pass them along. English history is a particular favourite."

He looked pleasantly surprised. "I do not know many young ladies who harbour a passion for history. None at all, in fact. You are most unusual, Miss Middleton."

Her blush deepened. "Are you fond of history as well, Lord Solton?"

He nodded. "I am. I shall have to take you to the library at Sandhurst Hall one day. We have a splendid collection of history books. It is one of the most impressive in the district." He paused, staring at her intently. "And I enjoy local history as well. That is why I know these ruins and other historical and archaeological places of interest in this area."

"I should like to go to the library as well," cut in Patricia, staring at him avidly. "I have a fascination for books about birdlife. Especially if the illustrations are good."

Lord Solton nodded absently. "Of course, Miss Poldark."

There was an awkward silence. Ruth drifted away, feeling uncomfortable. It felt as if Patricia had cut in on a private conversation. But of course, it had been no such thing. Still, the feeling lingered. Hastily, she moved further away, thinking about their exchange.

He was an amateur historian. A passion he shared with her and her father. And he had promised to take her to the Sandhurst library and show her the historical collection. Her fingers itched to feel the books in her hand. She knew that her father would be over the moon to have access to such a collection. He begged, borrowed, and stole to get the books he brought home for them both to read.

She gazed back at him covertly. She jumped to find that he was

staring straight at her with the most curious, almost yearning expression upon his face.

She quickly looked away, her face burning again. Had she just imagined that? She must have. Perhaps he was just still animated after their discussion about history.

There was another low rumble of thunder. Lord Solton suddenly walked to the edge of the ruins, gazing out onto the horizon. He was frowning. He turned around to the trio of ladies.

“I am afraid we will have to cut short our visit,” he said slowly. “I think that storm has decided to come this way after all.”

Ruth gazed up at the sky. She had been so distracted by the ruins that she hadn't noticed that it wasn't the clear blue it had been when they had been eating any longer. Rather, it was a dull metallic grey, with clouds moving quickly across. As if to underscore it, there was another low rumble of thunder and she suddenly saw a flash of lightning over the hills.

It seemed that a storm was indeed coming. The first change in the weather, which had been practically perfect, since they had come here.

They packed up the picnic paraphernalia hastily, heading back in the direction they had come. It was dark now; the sun had retreated completely. Ruth glanced up anxiously at the sky. And then, she felt the first drops of rain, heavy and wet upon her arm.

They were walking quicker now, trying to escape it before the onslaught. But suddenly the heavens opened. The rain started to pelt down. They were only at the edge of the country lane still. It was at least half a mile until they reached Sandhurst Hall. They all started running but it was no use. They were completely drenched within five minutes. Ruth could barely see the lane in front of her.

Hugh shepherded the ladies along the lane back towards the estate. He cursed underneath his breath as the rain bucketed down upon them. He had miscalculated the approaching storm, thinking it would move in the opposite direction and not impact them. How wrong he had been.

Lady Clementine was waddling like a duck, using her delicate lace parasol to shield herself from it. It was little use. The material was not waterproof at all and he thought it probably would be ruined by the time they got to the house. He hoped she had brought another one.

The two young ladies were assisting each other through the rain, their arms interlinked. Their delicate sun bonnets were drooping. They both looked utterly miserable, like drowned rats.

“This way,” he commanded, leading them through a gate. He knew it was a short cut to Sandhurst Hall. But they would have to go across a field, which meant there might be mud. But that was better than being a moment longer in this deluge than they needed to be.

They were scurrying now, leaping over fallen logs. The hems of the ladies’ gowns were already dirtied from trailing through mud. The estate suddenly loomed before them. He breathed a sigh of relief. It

had appeared not a moment too soon.

Eventually they got to the back of the house, running towards the back servant's entrance. Some maids passing by stared at them in astonishment, their mouths gaping. But Hugh ignored them. It was imperative that they get dry as quickly as possible. The closest place was the wood fired stove in the kitchen.

He led them all into the kitchen. It was a hive of activity as always. Kitchen maids were kneading bread on the large central workbench. The cook, Mrs Mills, was at the stove, adding some carrots to a large cauldron before stirring it vigorously. She gazed at the party in amazement as they walked towards her.

"The saints preserve us!" she cried, putting down her wooden spoon and curtsying hastily. "Come to the stove! Before you all catch your death of cold!"

They needed no second bidding. They huddled near the stove, their teeth chattering, rubbing their hands. The cook flew into a flurry of activity, ordering maids to gather hot water for baths. Hugh knew he couldn't wait to peel his saturated clothes off before climbing into a tub and getting warmed through.

He gazed at Ruth. She had taken her sodden bonnet off, throwing it onto the back of a chair. Her hair had fallen down. The rain had turned it into a mass of curls, falling down her back. His gaze lowered. Her cream muslin morning gown was so wet it was clinging to the curves of her body. He could quite clearly see the outline of her full breasts, the nipples hard and erect, straining against the thin material.

Hastily, he averted his eyes. It wasn't proper to look at her like this.

But then, he couldn't resist looking at her again. His eyes took their fill before he turned resolutely away. He was suddenly, painfully hard. He closed his eyes, in an agony of desire and embarrassment.

Think of something else. Think of anything else!

He tried to concentrate on getting warm in the bath. But to his horror he suddenly pictured her lying in a tub, the saturated gown discarded upon the floor. Ruth was lying back in the bath, completely naked. He could clearly see her shoulders and her creamy neck. And then, those breasts, in all their glory, wet and glistening from the hot water...

He jumped guiltily at the sound of Miss Poldark sneezing. Three times in a row. Mrs Mills grabbed a blanket, muttering under her breath, wrapping it around the lady's shoulders.

The next minute, the ladies were all being shepherded away by maids towards the tubs. Then, they were gone. He breathed a sigh of pure relief. It had been sweet torture to be in Ruth's company in such a state. And he needed to get dry and warm himself.

He gritted his teeth. It seemed the sudden storm had intensified things between him and Miss Middleton, in a completely unexpected way. Now he had to endure amorous fantasies about her, along with everything else. It hardly seemed fair.

Ruth lay back in the bath, luxuriating in the feeling of being warm after being cold. But the water was starting to turn just a little cold

now. She guessed she had been in here for over half an hour. It was time to get out and get dressed.

Bessie, the maid, entered the room, closing the door behind her. She was carrying a freshly pressed gown in her arms.

“I think it is time for me to get out, Bessie,” she said slowly. “Are Miss Poldark and her aunt down in the parlour yet?”

Bessie shook her head. “No, miss. Both ladies have taken to their beds after their baths. They are woeful, sneezing constantly. Mrs Petty thinks they have come down with colds.” She paused. “She says she will send for the physician tomorrow if they grow any worse.”

Ruth’s face twisted. “That is not good news at all! I hope they are both merely cold from being drenched and have not fallen ill because of it. I guess time will tell.”

“Indeed, it will, miss,” said Bessie, holding out a towel to her. “Lord Solton says he feels well at least. How do you feel?”

Ruth wrapped the towel around her. “I think that I feel perfectly well. But perhaps I shall have an early evening after dinner, just in case. The ladies shall be abed anyway.”

Bessie nodded. “I think that a good plan! Why, you were ever so wet from that storm. I have never seen anything like it when that door opened, and you all came running inside.”

Ruth smiled faintly. "The storm came upon us very suddenly. We could not outrun it. And there was simply nowhere to seek shelter until it passed."

They kept chatting about the storm as Bessie dressed her. Then Ruth decided to see for herself how Patricia and Aunt Clementine were faring. She knocked softly on Patricia's door. There was a faint, muffled reply. "Come in."

Patricia was propped up in her bed. She did indeed look woeful, as Bessie had said. Her skin looked clammy, and her eyes were red rimmed. As Ruth entered, sitting down on the side of the bed, she sneezed violently.

"Oh, you are not well at all," said Ruth in dismay, taking her friend's hand. "I am so sorry to see you like this, Patricia."

Patricia smiled weakly. "I am afraid I always catch cold easily," she said. Her voice was croaky. "Mama claims I was constantly in bed with colds when I was small. And we were drenched to the bone in that storm, Ruth. I do not think I have ever been more wet in my life."

Ruth nodded. "Yes. It was a pity we had nowhere to shelter until it passed." She frowned slightly. "Do you think we should send for the physician now?"

Patricia shook her head. "No, not yet. All I want is sleep. Hopefully, I shall be well by the morrow." She hesitated. "How is Aunt Clementine? I heard she is unwell too. At her age it is more dangerous."

"I will look in on her next," said Ruth. "Do not worry, dearest. I am sure you shall both recover quickly and be on your feet in no time."

Patricia smiled faintly. Her eyes were dropping. She sneezed again, three times in a row, quite violently. She looked like she was about to fall asleep. Ruth stood up, gazing down at her.

"I shall leave you to rest now," she said gently. "You need to sleep. I shall come by later to check on you again and make sure that the maids bring you refreshment."

Patricia nodded. "You are such an angel, Ruth. I am so very glad that I chose to bring you with me to Sandhurst Hall. What would I do without you?"

Ruth felt a sharp pang of guilt. Her poor friend was sick in bed, and she didn't look like she was going to get better anytime soon. And she had been unforgiving about Patricia's motivation in pursuing Lord Solton, judging her harshly. If it wasn't for Patricia, she wouldn't even be here. Her friend had been beneficent and so very kind towards her. She wished that the recent distance between them had not inexplicably arisen.

She took a deep breath. She would make it up to Patricia by nursing her tenderly if she continued to be sick. She would wait on her night and day if necessary. But hopefully, her friend would be on her feet by the morrow anyway and they could continue their stay, well and healthy.

"I will go to Aunt Clementine now," she said.

But Patricia didn't reply. She had already fallen asleep. She was so pale her face looked like a death mask. Ruth crept out of the room, closing the door softly behind her. A tremor of fear went through her.

Mild colds could easily turn bad. She had heard of people catching them then dying within days.

She firmly pushed the dark thought aside, continuing on to Aunt Clementine's chambers. She would pray for both ladies tonight. All would be well. It must be.

Chapter 9

Hugh knocked softly on the guest chamber door before entering. The curtains were half drawn and there was little light in the room. A strong smell of camphor assaulted him, causing him to reel back a little.

Miss Poldark was in the bed, buried beneath the blankets. Even from this distance he could see how violently she shivered. She was fast asleep, with beads of sweat upon her forehead. She didn't look well at all. He turned to Ruth, who was seated next to her friend. He had only seen her briefly at breakfast before she had returned to the room to keep vigil beside her friend's sickbed.

"How is our patient faring?" he asked softly.

Ruth sighed heavily. Hugh could see how tired and worried she was. "She is no better," she replied slowly. "She shivers and shakes constantly. It seems like she simply cannot get warm, no matter how many extra blankets we lay upon her."

Hugh nodded gravely. "Yes, it is the fever. Dr Higgins told me she is almost delirious with it. He is very concerned."

Ruth gasped with dismay. "You just spoke with him?"

Hugh nodded again. "Yes. He says that there is nothing more to be done than what we are already doing. A poultice has been applied to her chest this morning?"

Ruth nodded. "Yes. And she was awake long enough to drink some of Mrs Mills' special herbal tea infusion."

Hugh smiled faintly. "I have had Mrs Mills' infusions many times while ill over the years. She is a dab hand at it. Miss Poldark is in safe hands. She will get the very best of care here." He hesitated, gazing at her intently. "And how is Lady Clementine?"

"She is abed," said Ruth, smiling a little. "She has a slight cold but is bright eyed and sprightly, doing her knitting. She is nowhere near as ill as Patricia. But I still look in on her from time to time."

"It is strange," said Hugh slowly, frowning. "One would have thought that the aged Lady Clementine would be more susceptible than a young lady like Miss Poldark."

"I suppose it depends on the constitution of the person," said Ruth thoughtfully. "Lady Clementine is obviously very hardy! And Patricia did tell me that she has always suffered badly with colds."

"I feel dreadful," said Hugh, his frown deepening. "I should have realised that there was a chance the storm would pass our way and got you all back to the house immediately." He took a deep, ragged breath. "I take full responsibility for this."

"It was just bad luck," soothed Ruth, gazing at him softly, her eyes doe like. "You are not responsible. Do not feel badly. People catch cold."

He stared at her. She was making him feel better with her gentle assurances. But he knew the truth. It had been an error of judgement on his part. It was his duty to take care of these ladies while they were resident at Sandhurst Hall.

“It could have happened when you were not with us,” continued Ruth, smiling weakly. “We have gone on many walks here after all. And if you had not been with us, urging us to pack up and leave, it may have been far worse. We probably would have been completely oblivious to the approaching storm.”

He smiled crookedly. “You are only saying such things to make me feel better. It is much appreciated.” He paused, gazing at her steadily. “I am only grateful that *you* did not take ill, Miss Middleton.”

Ruth flushed. He felt a sudden warmth all through his body as he watched the colour suffuse her neck and face. Suddenly, he vividly remembered the turn his mind had taken when he had beheld her in her saturated gown. The way it had clung to every line of her body. The full breasts and hard nipples. And then dreaming of her in a bath...

He coughed sharply, turning away. This was mortifying. He simply *must* get control of himself. They were conversing in a lady's sick room, for heaven's sake.

“I shall leave you,” he said abruptly. “Please know you may have anything at my disposal for Miss Poldark's care. The physician shall return tomorrow but I can send for him immediately if she worsens.”

“Thank you,” said Ruth, in a quiet voice. “You are kindness itself.”

He nodded, not knowing what to say. “Well, if you require a break, do not forget that my library is at your disposal.”

“Oh, yes,” said Ruth absently. “We talked of your collection of history books. I had quite forgotten. Perhaps I shall peruse it quickly and pick one to read while I sit at Patricia’s bedside when I get a chance.”

He nodded again, feeling awkward. Then, without another word, he strode out of the room. His heart was thumping uncomfortably. It seemed that being around Miss Ruth Middleton would always be hard for him, even in a sick room.

Ruth yawned faintly as she walked towards the staircase. She had just been to the kitchen, requesting another of the cook’s herbal teas for Patricia. It was already late afternoon; the day had flown by. She felt stiff and a little disoriented.

She paused at the bottom of the staircase. Lord Solton had told her she was free to take any books she liked from the library here. Perhaps she could take a brief moment to peruse them and select one before continuing her vigil at Patricia’s bedside.

She turned around, heading towards the library. She had not spent any time in the room but had been shown where it was when they first arrived, and the Earl had taken them for a brief tour of the house. Occasionally she had thought she might take a look, but Patricia had

never really been interested.

She gasped as she pushed open the door. She had grown used to the baroque splendour of Sandhurst Hall, but this room was simply amazing. It was extremely large and was lined with bookshelves, all the way to the ceiling. She walked slowly into it, her eyes growing wider with every second. A thought lodged in her mind like a dart.

How Papa would adore this.

Her eyes feasted upon the books. She adored this herself. She had always secretly dreamed of a library such as this, with so many books at her disposal. And a music conservatory where she could practise. The benefits of being so very wealthy, she thought ruefully. This collection had obviously been built up over centuries. There were many extremely old books.

She kept walking. There were books on every subject imaginable. Books on botany, astronomy, and archaeology. Poetry tomes and novels. Folklore. A whole section devoted to political science. At last, she found the history section. Within seconds, she was totally absorbed.

After five minutes, she selected one, pulling it off the shelf. It was an old book, bound in thick green leather, about the War of the Roses. She had selected it because she and Lord Solton had been talking about that period in history just yesterday at the castle ruins.

She was just about to leave the room when she saw the blue chintz upholstered armchair in a far corner. It was in a charming position, near a large window, overlooking the gardens. It also looked extremely comfortable. Much more comfortable than the chair she had

been sitting in all day by Patricia's bedside.

She hesitated. She was tired and the chair was so enticing. Perhaps she could just sit down and look through the book for a minute before returning to her vigil? She bit her lip. Patricia had barely woken all day and had been deeply asleep when she had left her. It would not matter very much.

She settled down into the chair, opening the book to the first page. It was well written and informative. She started reading, slipping into the book as if it were a warm glove, instantly captivated.

She didn't know how much time had passed when she suddenly heard the door open and footsteps entering. Hastily she closed the book, her heart thumping.

Lord Solton was standing there, gazing at her. He wasn't smiling.

She jumped up, gripping the book tightly, feeling flustered, as if she had been caught doing something she shouldn't. "I do apologise," she said quickly. "I lost track of the time...am I needed in Patricia's room?"

He shook his head slowly. "I do not think so. There is no change in her condition." He paused. "You do not need to apologise, Miss Middleton. I invited you to peruse the library after all."

She flushed. "Yes, of course you did!" She bit her lip. "Were you searching for me or simply visiting for your own purpose?"

He smiled. "A bit of both, I would say. I visited Miss Poldark's sick room to inform you that dinner would be a little late this evening but you were nowhere to be found. One of the maids told me that you had gone to the kitchens and would be straight back." He shrugged his shoulders. "I was wanting to choose a new book anyway."

Her heart started to slow down. She didn't know why she felt like such an interloper in here when he had expressly invited her to choose a book. Perhaps it was the fact she was alone with him. She should curtsy and leave.

"What did you choose?" he asked, gesturing to the book in her hand.

She smiled slowly. "A book on the War of the Roses. It is most informative."

"Can I see?" he asked, holding out his hand.

She walked slowly towards him, placing the book in his hand. He gazed down at it, nodding, before passing it back to her.

"That is one of the best books on that period," he said, his dark eyes alight. "I have read it twice. I find more is absorbed upon a second reading."

She smiled. "Yes, I could imagine that would be the case. There is such a lot of detail, is there not?"

He nodded. "There is. Many battles, intrigues and drama." He smiled. "My own family were against the Plantagenets. They fought on the side of the House of Lancaster, symbolised by the red rose."

Ruth's eyes widened. It was so very impressive to her that someone could trace their lineage so far back and know such things. But then, the Battencourt's were a noble family with a long pedigree.

"I can tell you more about the family history if we sit down," he said slowly, staring at her. "If you are interested, of course."

Ruth hesitated. She was very interested indeed. She loved history after all. And the thought of hearing a noble family history was almost irresistible. But they were alone—it wasn't proper at all. And she should return to Patricia's bedside.

"It shall not take long," he said, smiling crookedly. "I can give you the abridged version if you like."

She bit her lip. Then she nodded. He gestured to the chair. She sat back down. He perched on the window ledge, gazing out into the gardens, as he spoke.

"My ancestor, the third Earl of Montbatten, raised funds for Henry Tudor's invasion," he said slowly. "He secretly sent jewels and coin in hidden trunks across the sea to France, where the incumbent was living."

“That would have been dangerous,” said Ruth, her eyes shining. “If the Yorkist king, Richard the Third had found out he probably would have hung.”

“Much worse than that,” grimaced Lord Solton. “He may have been hung, drawn and quartered. They liked to make an example of traitors in those days.” He paused. “But my ancestor was obviously smart and secretive. He evaded detection and he chose the winning side in the end.”

“He did,” said Ruth slowly. “Did he fight alongside Henry Tudor at the Battle of Bosworth, when the Yorkist king was finally defeated?”

Lord Solton laughed shortly. “He was clever, as I said. He hung back, making it look as if he was loyal to the King, then joined Henry Tudor’s forces to crush him when victory was at hand.” He smiled faintly. “The new king rewarded him handsomely for his loyalty. It was how my family’s fortunes were made.”

Ruth gazed around the library. “It must be wonderful to have such a rich family history,” she said wistfully. “I do not know much about my own ancestors at all. I am afraid they have faded into obscurity.”

There was an awkward pause. Lord Solton stared at her. He cleared his throat.

“Your parents have obviously brought you up well, Miss Middleton,” he said slowly. “You may not have an impressive family history like my own, but you are clever and inquisitive. You are book learned, which not many young ladies are.”

Ruth blushed. "I have my father to thank for that. My mother always tried to discourage me from reading."

He smiled slowly. "I am not of the opinion, like many others of my ilk, that book learning is undesirable or even dangerous for a lady. I think it enhances the mind and ladies can be just as clever and inquisitive as gentlemen." He paused. "But you are not only book-learned. You are gifted musically. You are very accomplished. More accomplished than almost any young lady in my acquaintance."

Ruth's blush deepened. She felt as if her face was on fire. She wasn't used to being praised like this, except by her parents. And she never truly believed them anyway.

"One cannot buy such accomplishments," he continued thoughtfully. "Many young ladies of good breeding and from fine families are vapid and silly. They have few skills or talents. They might be wealthy or titled or both but they are inferior to you in every way."

Ruth's mouth dropped open in astonishment. She simply could not believe he was saying this to her. Apart from the fact he was often so distant and cold, he was a viscount. The son and heir of an earl. He was superior to her in every way imaginable. For such a fine man to seemingly admire her, telling her she was superior to much higher born ladies, was shocking indeed.

"Thank you for your kind words," she whispered, her face still afire. "But you do not have to say them. I am very aware of my inferior background and connections, Lord Solton. I am no lady like those born so high above me." She hesitated. "My parents have tried to educate me well, but I am under no illusions."

He was silent for a moment, staring at her pensively.

“You have read much upon the War of the Roses,” he said slowly. “Are you familiar with the story of how Elizabeth Woodville, the wife of Edward the Sixth who became the Queen of England, met her future husband?”

Ruth’s heart quickened. “Yes, I am. She was a widow, and her lands and estate were stripped after her husband fought against the King,” she said slowly. “The story goes that Elizabeth stood at a certain spot every day, with her two young sons, where she knew the new King rode past, to beseech him to return them to her.”

Lord Solton nodded. “And the legend is that the new King was so entranced by her beauty that he fell in love with her instantly. Elizabeth became Queen, even though she was not as high born as many others, and most were against the match. She had many enemies.”

Ruth smiled faintly. “It is a very romantic story,” she said. “The historians do not know if their meeting truly happened that way. It has become legend. But the fact remains that the King and the Queen were a love match. He should have married someone who would benefit his reign politically, but he did not.”

“He chose instead a poor widow,” he said slowly. “Elizabeth was of noble birth, but a King should choose a princess. Apart from the fact that a King’s marriage is usually arranged for political reasons.”

There was an awkward silence. Ruth stared at him, a bit flummoxed. Did she dare to question him further? The conversation had already

veered in the strangest direction. An intimate direction, even though they were still ostensibly talking about history.

“Why did you mention Elizabeth Woodville in relation to me?” she asked, her heart thumping wildly.

He was silent for a moment. Almost as still as a statue, gazing out the window. Then he slowly turned to face her.

“Because the King obviously saw something in Elizabeth that no one else did,” he replied thoughtfully. “He had his pick of ladies and yet he chose her. She was not as well born as other ladies, but he insisted that he would have no other. He was willing to fight to have her.” He hesitated. “Elizabeth was naturally superior, despite her situation...as you are, Miss Middleton.”

Their eyes met and held. Ruth felt as if she could barely breathe. As if her lungs were clogged and she simply could not get any air at all. The air seemed to be charged around them, as if sparks were shooting into the air.

She stood up abruptly, her heart racing wildly. She picked up the book, holding it tightly to her chest.

“I should return to Patricia’s bedside,” she said quickly. “It was a most interesting discussion, Lord Solton. Perhaps we could continue it over dinner.” She paused. “And thank you again for letting me have free reign of your library. It is much appreciated.”

He nodded, standing up and facing her. She gazed up at him. Her

heart flipped over in her chest. He was very close. So close that she felt his warm breath upon her face.

Suddenly, he reached out, trailing a hand down on the side of her face. She gasped as she froze, staring at him. His face had a peculiar expression upon it—the same yearning, almost hungry one that she had discerned from time to time. Her skin where he had touched her felt aflame, as if he had left a trail of fire upon her skin.

Abruptly, he dropped his hand, looking askance.

“I do apologise,” he said hastily, stepping back. “You just looked so enchanting in the light of the window...I do not know what overcame me...”

Ruth could barely breathe again. She didn’t know what to say at all. She turned, running out of the room, hugging the book tightly to her chest. She raced up the staircase, entering Patricia’s chambers. Her friend was still deeply asleep, with a maid sitting by her bedside.

“Has anything changed?” she asked breathlessly.

The maid stood up, shaking her head. “No, miss. She drank the tea you ordered for her then went straight back to sleep. She has not stirred since.” She gazed at the book. “You have been to the library. We were wondering where you were. Lord Solton was in here asking after you.”

Ruth’s face burnt bright crimson. “It is quite alright. I have seen him.”

The maid dropped a quick curtsy. "Very good, miss." She left the room.

Ruth sank down upon the chair. She was shaking so much she could barely hold the book anymore. She placed it down on the bedside table, before turning to gaze at her sleeping friend. Patricia's face was deathly pale, and she was still shivering intermittently beneath the pile of blankets she slept beneath.

Her eyes filled with tears. What was happening between Lord Solton and herself? She just didn't know anymore. But one thing was for certain: she felt as if she was falling. As if she were on a trajectory she could no longer predict...or explain.

Chapter 10

The next day, Hugh covertly watched Ruth as she entered the dining room for breakfast. She looked tired, he thought, his heart flipping in his chest. She was wearing a plain gown and her brown hair was scraped off her face with no adornment. She looked like what she was at the moment: a nursemaid. All she needed was a crisp white apron and a frilly white cap.

She sat down at the table, smiling faintly at his father. He noticed that she was avoiding looking at him yet. It had been the same at dinner the previous evening—she had barely looked at him and hadn't talked much. After dinner, she had excused herself quickly, saying she needed to look in on Miss Poldark, as well as Lady Clementine, before retiring.

"How did you sleep, my dear?" asked the Earl, gazing at her sympathetically. "I have heard you have been playing nursemaid to our poor patients." He shook his head sorrowfully. "A most unfortunate state of events!"

Ruth smiled tremulously. "Indeed, it is, My Lord. But I slept tolerably well, at least. I am refreshed enough to continue my vigil at Patricia's bedside." She turned and stared at Hugh. "The physician is returning this morning?"

He nodded. "Dr Higgins should be here by ten at the latest," he replied. "Have you heard word as to Miss Poldark's condition this morning?"

Ruth nodded as she sipped her tea. "She is no better. In fact, the maid

thinks she may have worsened. She said that Patricia was finding it hard to breathe during the night and that she was delirious with her fever, shouting out and tossing and turning.”

The Earl shook his head again. “Rest assured that Dr Higgins is very good, my dear. He has attended our family since my children were small. He once saved my daughter Isabella after she fell very ill with the measles. He has my full confidence, and he should have yours as well.”

Ruth smiled weakly, sipping her tea.

“You should eat something,” said Hugh. “You must keep your strength up. We cannot have you falling ill as well through exhaustion, Miss Middleton.”

Ruth nodded, but she did not look at him. She reached for some toast, buttering it before adding strawberry jam. She ate it in small bites, not looking as if she was relishing it at all. Perhaps it was just exhaustion, but Hugh felt a small pang of guilt that her low spirits might be about something else. That perhaps it was because of what had passed between them in the library.

He couldn’t help staring at her over the rim of his own teacup. She looked tired and dispirited. She wasn’t dressed up in the slightest. Still, her beauty was undeniable. It seemed to radiate from her, making her luminous.

He sipped his tea. He had meant what he said to her yesterday. She was superior to the other young ladies, and her low birth did not change that. But he had not meant to caress her face in such a way. That had been impulsive and irresponsible. And now, he had

frightened her off entirely. How could he have lost control in such a way?

He gritted his teeth. Something had changed between them; it was as if they were growing closer with every encounter. And he knew now that he was not only physically attracted to her, he was also attracted to her mind. Their shared love of history was a bond that connected them. She was clever and articulate, as well as being beautiful, charming, talented and kind.

Everything that he had ever desired in a woman.

He thought of the story of Elizabeth Woodville and Edward the Sixth. The King of England and the lower born lady, who had defied convention, insisting that they must marry. Elizabeth Woodville had hardly been a maid, but it proved the point that unconventional marriages *did* happen.

If a king could do it...then why couldn't he?

Suddenly, Ruth stood up, throwing her napkin on the table. She excused herself quickly, saying she must get to Patricia's bedside. His heart lurched, as he watched her leave the room. He had to speak to her alone again. But how?

Ruth left Patricia's sick room, closing the door softly behind her. She was so worried about her friend. The physician had just attended her and told them all grimly that if Patricia's fever did not break soon

then she was in real danger.

She walked slowly down the stairs, so upset she could barely think properly. She must find the Earl and tell him that they should send for Patricia's family immediately. What if the worse happened and they hadn't even been informed that she was so ill?

She shied away from the thought of approaching Lord Solton on the matter. She must only speak to him when it was utterly necessary from now on. Her face burnt as she thought of what had happened between them yesterday, and how poor ill Patricia would have reacted to it. Patricia, who had made it plain that she wanted to be the next Countess of Montbatten.

She sighed heavily. At least, Lady Clementine was not so sick. The lady was still in bed, nursing her cold, but was bright eyed and cheery. She had decreed that she would probably be up and about within a day and had expressed horror over the deteriorating condition of her niece.

Ruth was just about to head towards the Earl's study, when she saw the pianoforte in the drawing room. There was no one about at all. And the thought of sitting down at the instrument and pouring her sorrow and worry into the keys was overwhelming. It wouldn't take long. And then she could find the Earl and talk to him before returning to the sick room.

She settled herself at the instrument, raising her hands over the keys. When she hit the first notes it sent a tremor through her whole body. She played anything that came into her head, one song merging into the next. At the end, she was so involved with the music that she closed her eyes in pure rapture. She felt as if she and the music had become one entity; as if they had merged in some transcendent way.

She slowly opened them, as she played the last notes. She blanched. Standing at the end of the pianoforte was Lord Solton. He had the strangest look upon his face.

“I feel as if you are the Pied Piper,” he said, in a pained voice. “As if you lured me to your side with music.”

She stood up, her heart racing wildly. “I did not know you were there,” she said, in a strangled voice. “I was only taking a short break...”

She went to walk past him, but he placed a hand upon her arm, stopping her flight. She froze to the spot. Slowly, she gazed up at him. He was staring down at her with an intense look upon his face. His eyes were as dark as two burning coals.

“Please,” he said, in an agonised whisper. “Can we speak?”

She nodded slowly. She didn’t want to at all. She just wanted to flee from his side. The desire was overwhelming. But she couldn’t be so rude.

“If you wish.” Her voice was thready and breathless.

His hand upon her arm tightened. “I do not understand what is happening between us,” he said slowly. “Only that it is. It is growing more powerful by the day and I can no longer deny it.”

“What...what do you mean?” Her heart was thudding so hard it seemed to be reverberating in her ears.

He smiled gently. “Miss Middleton, if my attentions towards you are unwelcome, you need only say the word and I shall graciously withdraw.” He stared at her intently, pinning her to the spot with the force of his gaze. “But I feel that you are growing as close to me as I am to you. Do you deny it?”

She took a deep, ragged breath, unable to believe what he had just said to her. She had wondered, of course. The way he sought her out, the intense looks...everything about how he was when he was around her. And then, what had happened between them just yesterday in the library. The way he had talked about the unlikely love story between Elizabeth Woodville and Richard the Third before caressing her face with his hand.

He admires me. He truly does.

She was still grappling with the truth of it. How could it have happened? He had been so distant and cold towards her when she had first arrived at his home. She had thought him entirely indifferent to her, even that he found her disagreeable and foolish. He had been forced to rescue her more than once.

And yet...here he was, standing before her, declaring that he cared for her. It was unbelievable. He was a viscount, the son and heir of an earl. And she was merely poor Miss Middleton, solicitor's daughter from Cheapside.

He was asking her to respond to him. He was imploring her. She could lie and say she didn't know what he meant at all and that she was not interested in the slightest. It would be the safest thing to do all round, for a multitude of reasons.

Patricia had set her sights upon him. And apart from that, he could never marry her. Whatever was between them was destined to fade away, to fizzle out, before it could ever take root.

She opened her mouth to say just that. But to her utter surprise, no words emerged. She kept gaping at him like a fish.

"Do you deny it?" he repeated urgently, lowering his voice.

"I cannot deny it," she whispered, her heart lurching violently. "But neither can I encourage it. You are very far above me, Lord Solton. So far that you cannot possibly enjoy admiring a lady such as I."

His face twisted. "I must admit that I have tried to fight it. I have tried and failed. You are the most bewitching lady I have ever encountered. Everything about you is perfection." He took a deep, ragged breath. "Your background and lack of connections no longer matter to me..."

Her eyes filled with tears. "They matter. Of course, they matter! And besides, there are other reasons I cannot encourage this. Reasons that I cannot speak of, without betraying a confidence." She hesitated, so torn she could barely stand it. "I admire you greatly. I have never felt such a way towards a gentleman before. But I cannot in good conscience encourage you."

His hand slipped off her arm. His face was a mask of disappointment.

“Truly?” he whispered. “What must I do to convince you I am serious? I am not dallying with you, Miss Middleton. I am not a cad who plays with the affections of young ladies then leaves them dangling.” He took another deep breath. “I have thought long and hard about this and I am willing to overlook your background for the sake of my feelings towards you...”

She turned away, so he could not see the profound hurt upon her face. “It would always be there,” she said faintly. “It would be there between us. You may say you can overlook it, but I do not believe you. You shall be an earl one day. You do not want a middleclass girl as a countess.”

She laughed suddenly. Not because she found the situation in anyway amusing, but because of the sheer absurdity of it. It was ludicrous that he was even speaking to her in this way. And even though she could see the sincerity upon his face, she knew that she spoke the truth. Her background *would* come between them eventually.

“You have never been to my home,” she whispered, her eyes glittering with tears. “It is the size of a doll’s house compared to the grandeur of your own home. It is in a safe but not very fashionable area of London. My family only have one maid of all work and a cook. I have no personal maid. *That* is the world that I come from.”

He was silent, his mouth a bitter line.

“You have everything,” she said, a sob at the end of her voice. “Your library alone is the size of my home. You have wealth and title and privilege. You can have any lady in the world. Why would you want

me?"

"Because I do," he said slowly, his eyes beseeching her. "I cannot change it. I cannot rip it out of my chest. I have tried and I have failed."

She shook her head violently. "I must go back to Patricia. She needs me."

She walked out of the room before he could stop her, running up the stairs towards her friend's chambers. Her heart was racing. Would he follow her, try to stop her again? She entered the room, closing the door firmly behind her. She sat down, gazing fearfully at the door. But he did not come.

She didn't know whether to be relieved or disappointed.

She stared at Patricia. Her friend was still tossing and turning on the bedsheets, in an agony of fever. Ruth picked up a rag, dipping it into the wash basin, before wringing it out and patting it on her friend's hot forehead.

"Hush," she whispered, her eyes filling with tears again. "All will be well."

Patricia didn't respond. Ruth bit her lip. Suddenly, she remembered that she had been going to talk to the Earl, about sending word to Patricia's family. She had been lured to play the pianoforte and then Lord Solton had been there. She had totally forgotten what she had set out to do.

A wave of shame flushed over her face. She was the worst friend in the world. Patricia had taken pity upon her, taking her to this grand house, to stay with titled people. She had been kindness itself, so very generous. And this was how she repaid her—by letting an infatuation develop with one of her hosts, a gentleman that Patricia herself wished to court, and forgetting about her seriously ill friend entirely.

A single tear trickled down her face. She was shameful, a selfish woman, and a terrible friend. She didn't deserve to be here. How she wished she could just leave Sandhurst Hall forever. How she wished she had never come here at all.

That night as she lay in bed, exhausted with worry and shame, she turned over and sobbed piteously. She had managed to avoid seeing Lord Solton for the rest of the day at least. He had not returned to the sick room and had been absent during dinner. She had dined with the Earl and Lady Clementine, who had felt well enough to go downstairs for the first time.

She had suggested to the Earl that they write to Patricia's family. But the Earl had demurred, saying that they would wait until the next day. He didn't want to alarm her family. They would have a better idea of her condition in the morning. If she was the same or worse, he would send word.

Ruth turned restlessly, gazing at the wall. Patricia had not improved over the course of the day. It was imperative that the Earl send word to her family, but he seemed not to understand that. She had been very frustrated, as well as tired. But it had been good to see Aunt

Clementine up and about at least.

Her eyelids started to droop. Suddenly, as if a wave had crashed over her, she fell into a restless sleep. And just as suddenly, Lord Solton loomed into her mind, almost as if he was in the room with her...

She was walking down the long downstairs hallway at Sandhurst Hall. She didn't know where she was going or what she was doing. It was dark; candles burnt all around her, tiny patches of light in the darkness, their flames flickering like fireflies.

She knew he was there before she saw him. She could sense him, coming towards her out of the shadows. Her heart started racing within her chest. And suddenly, there he was, his commanding figure right next to her. His eyes burnt into her own. A wave of wild sensation swept through her, unlike anything she had felt before in her life.

"Ruth," he whispered. "Ruth."

She reached up, tracing his lips with her thumb. She had never heard him say her name before. It sounded beautiful and exotic on his lips. As if she were a different person entirely. As if she had become someone different through him.

He pulled her into his arms. They were so close that she could smell him. It was arousing and disconcerting at the same time. She was filled with a deep desire, so deep, that she didn't care if she surrendered to it. All she wanted was to be one with him.

But suddenly, she saw another figure, emerging from the shadows. It was

Patricia. Her friend seemed oblivious to them, but Ruth hastily stepped back, pushing him away. Then, to her horror, Patricia started to dissolve and melt away into the ground, as if she were made from ice.

“No!” cried Ruth. “No!”

But her entreaty made no difference. Patricia was gone. She had vanished as if she had never been there. Ruth struggled to run to her, but she could not move. She clawed the air, desperately trying to move. But it was useless.

“She is gone,” said Lord Solton, with a wry smile. “There is no point.”

Ruth gazed back at him. He didn’t seem to care at all. And now, he was dissolving too. Twisting and turning as he slid down into the ground, before disappearing entirely.

“It is all my fault,” she cried, wringing her hands. “I have done this to the both of you!”

She tried to run away from the horror of it all. But her legs still wouldn’t move. She was stuck in this hallway, which seemed to lengthen before her very eyes. She screamed, flailing, as she fell to the ground...

Ruth woke up with a start, panting. Her heart was racing wildly, and she felt as if she couldn’t breathe. Her mind was filled with the nightmare, as if it was indeed real.

Patricia. I must check on Patricia!

The urge was overwhelming. It was some deep instinct that was screaming at her. Her mind still full of the strange dream, she stumbled out of bed, hastily putting on her dressing gown. Quickly, she grabbed a candlestick, lighting the candle. And then she quietly made her way out of her room and down the dark hallway towards her friend's chambers.

She took a deep, ragged breath. She must check that on her friend. It was imperative. Once she had seen with her own eyes that she was still alive then she could rest easily.

She stumbled. The hallway was so dark. The entire household was abed. She entered Patricia's chambers. The room was completely dark, and no one was in there besides the sick woman in the bed. Ruth quickly walked towards it, holding the candle aloft.

Patricia was tossing and turning in her sleep. Ruth let out a sigh of pure relief. Her friend had not suddenly died in her bed. She was alive!

She sat down in the chair beside the bed, placing the candle on the bedside table. She would just sit here for a moment, before returning to her own room. But within minutes, her head started to droop onto her chin, and she was fast asleep.

Chapter 11

Hugh poured himself a tumbler of whisky, downing it in one gulp. It wasn't enough. Quickly, he poured himself another. The second was better; he sipped it, feeling the liquor hit his bloodstream. He sat down near the fire in his study, staring into the flickering flames. Even though it was the height of summer, it got very cold in here late at night.

He grimaced, as the clock upon the mantelpiece chimed midnight. He should have retired at least an hour ago. There was no reason for him to be sitting in this room drinking into the night. He grimaced again. He was lying to himself. There *was* a reason he was sitting here brooding. And that reason was Miss Ruth Middleton.

He set the tumbler on a side table, trying to make sense of the situation. He hadn't been intending any of it. He felt as if he was being swept away on a vast wave that was completely out of his control. And he had been caught in the midst of it before he even realised it had hit him.

I must forget her.

The thought lodged into his mind forcibly. He couldn't deny to himself the truth of it. She had told him outright today that she would not encourage him. She had told him that even though she had started to care for him as he did for her, she still would not do it. He should just accept the fact that he had tried, and he had failed. He must respect her choice.

But she said that she does care for me.

He grimaced, downing the second whisky. His mind kept going back to that fact. If she had rejected him, saying that she simply had no interest in him in that way, then perhaps he could accept it better. But she had admitted what he had thought: she *did* admire him. And that fact made it all the more complicated.

He sat there brooding for another half hour. Eventually he got up, putting the firescreen in place and grabbing a candlestick. This was useless. He needed to go to at least try to go to sleep. The situation would still be the same in the morning.

He walked down the long, darkened hallway. His eyes widened. Miss Poldark's chamber door was opening and a tall female figure in a long white nightgown and matching dressing gown walked out, holding a candlestick aloft. He saw that her long brown hair fell in a plait down her back.

His heart seized. It was Ruth.

He realised in that instant that he had never called her by her Christian name. She had always been Miss Middleton to him, and he was Lord Solton to her. Suddenly, he longed to hear her say his name. He wanted to just hear it from her lips, even once.

He stopped, staring at her. At the same time, she turned around and saw him. She was so shocked she almost dropped the candlestick.

He walked swiftly to her side. "I did not mean to alarm you," he said, in a low, quiet voice. "I am merely walking from my study to my

chambers. The time got away from me this evening.”

She blushed fiercely. “I...I was just checking on Patricia,” she said slowly. “And I must have fallen asleep in the chair...”

He smiled gently. How typical it was that she would do such a thing—fall asleep while attending her friend in her sickbed. She was so loyal, so loving, so committed. He realised now that she and Miss Poldark hadn’t even been friends for that long, before that lady had invited Ruth to accompany her here. It spoke volumes about her gentle and faithful nature.

He was suddenly acutely aware that she was dressed in her night attire. The long white nightgown was as modest as any day gown, but somehow, it seemed more intimate. Perhaps it was just the association with beds. He was suddenly assailed by a vision of her lying beside him in his bed, in that very gown, with her plait hanging over her shoulder. He would carefully unravel it, spreading her hair upon the pillow, before sweeping his hands down to her shoulders...

“Miss Middleton,” he said, in a strangled voice. “I know that you told me that you will not encourage me. But I am overcome with longing and must ask you now if you still feel the same way. Is there any hope at all that you have changed your mind?”

Her blush deepened. She glanced fearfully up and down the darkened hallway.

“Perhaps we should talk in the room,” she said quickly. “Patricia shall not hear us, I am sure.”

He nodded, opening the door to the chamber. They stepped inside. His heart was hammering now. They both set their candlesticks down, before turning to each other. He quickly glanced over his shoulder towards the bed. Miss Poldark was merely a lump on the bed.

He exhaled slowly. He shouldn't be here at all. He was compromising not just Ruth but Miss Poldark as well by being in this room unchaperoned. Not that anyone could think he had designs upon Miss Poldark, being as sick as she was. But Ruth was quite another matter. It was very late, and she was only dressed in her night attire.

He knew the risk they were taking. But he also knew that the entire household was abed and unlikely to stir. They had a short amount of time.

"I am conflicted," Ruth whispered. "I cannot deny that I feel for you." She gave a strangled gasp. "I do not understand it at all, why these feelings have arisen. I know that we are unsuited. I have told myself constantly that I should not indulge them..."

His heart hammered harder, almost jumping out of his chest. There was hope. And he knew that even without these words, the fact that she had said they should talk in the room as opposed to the hallway boded well.

Tentatively, he placed a hand upon her shoulder. She gazed up at him with those bewitching doe-like eyes. He felt as if he were drowning within them.

She shuddered. He could feel it running through her, like a harp whose strings had just been plucked. The sight of her before him and

the feel of her was suddenly too much. He had been intending that they merely speak but he was beyond that now.

Hesitantly, he placed a hand on her other shoulder. She did not protest or step back. She simply kept staring up at him with those luminous eyes. He slowly pulled her towards him, lowering his lips upon hers.

He felt a deep quiver fall through him. The shock of it—the first touch of his lips upon her own. They were as soft and sweet as he had imagined. And she didn't stiffen or try to pull away. Instead, she twined her arms around his neck, pulling him closer as their lips started to explore. He felt the response within her, the twin desire, perfectly matching his own.

The kiss deepened. He gently prised open her mouth, darting his tongue inside. She shuddered again, arching her back. His passion intensified. Suddenly, his mouth left her own, drifting down that elegant swan like neck, tasting her skin. In a rush, he pulled the nightgown off her shoulders, exposing them. They were as pale and perfect as he had imagined.

His mouth drifted lower to the swell of her creamy breasts. The hunger was building; he could barely control it. One hand snaked down, taking a breast in one hand through the thin material of the gown, kneading it fiercely. He felt the nipple spring to life, hard and erect.

It was too much. Quickly, he pulled the gown lower. He gave a strangled gasp as his eyes feasted upon her bosom. They were full and heavy, and the nipples were rosy. He lowered his mouth, taking one nipple within, drawing it long and deep. He suckled feverishly.

She shuddered, almost jerking, her hands reaching for his head and pulling him closer. He was in heaven, he thought dimly. He kept pulling and sucking, feeling as if he could stay here doing this forever. That there was no other place that he wished to be...

Suddenly, there was a loud cry from the bed. They sprang apart, like scalded cats. Ruth hastily pulled her nightgown up. Miss Poldark was sitting upright in the bed, staring at them with wild eyes.

“Patricia,” gasped Ruth, rushing to her side. “I am so very sorry...”

Hugh’s heart dropped to the ground. This was worse than he could ever have imagined. How had he been so foolish? But his passion for her had completely clouded his rational mind. And now they must pay the consequences. Miss Poldark had seen them embracing. He stiffened, waiting for the flood of recriminations.

But it never came. The lady’s eyes were still wide and wild. But he suddenly realised that she wasn’t seeing anything at all. She had merely arisen in her sleep and was still in the midst of it. She wasn’t awake.

Ruth bit her lip, gazing back at him, obviously as confused as he was.

“She is not awake,” he whispered quickly. “She has arisen in her sleep. She did not see anything.”

Ruth visibly sagged. She kept staring at the lady, still unsure. But then she realised he spoke the truth. She waved a hand in front of Miss

Poldark's eyes. She blinked rapidly, but there was no other response. The lady didn't even know they were in the room.

"Lie down, Patricia," she entreated. "Lie down and rest."

Obediently, the lady did just that, settling down into the bed again. Hugh stared in utter amazement. He had heard tales of the suggestibility of sleepwalkers and the like, but had never witnessed it before.

"Let us leave her," he whispered.

Ruth nodded. They picked up their candlesticks and left the room, closing the door softly behind them. In the dark hallway he turned to her. She still looked frightened, her breath coming in short, sharp gasps.

"Do not worry," he whispered "She saw nothing. I assure you. She was deeply asleep."

Ruth bit her lip, tears glistening in her eyes. "But she might have," she said, in an anguished whisper. "She could easily have truly awoken and seen us. Oh, I am so ashamed..."

His heart lurched. "No. Do not be ashamed. We were merely expressing how we feel through touch. It is never something to be ashamed of." He hesitated. "What I feel for you is real. I am not dallying with you. I swear it."

She looked like she was about to burst into tears. "I should go. Anyone else might suddenly walk down this hallway and see us. I need to protect my reputation."

His heart twisted. "Of course. I am sorry that you are so upset. I never meant for things to go so far between us. Please believe me when I say that I do not want to compromise your reputation."

She nodded. "I do believe you. But the result is the same if it happens." She took a deep, shuddering breath. "We can talk tomorrow."

He nodded. "Yes, of course. Get some rest now, Miss..." he stopped, staring at her intently. "Please, may I call you by your Christian name? It seems ludicrous to be so formal, after what has passed between us."

She blushed fiercely. "Yes. I think so."

"Ruth," he said slowly, his eyes feasting upon her again. "Ruth. And I am Hugh."

She nodded shyly. "Hugh," she repeated, as if testing the name upon her tongue. "I like it. It suits you."

They gazed at each other, suddenly shy. It was as if they had been introduced for the first time. But it was so much more than that. A fierce bond had formed between them, cemented by the passion they had just shared. If he had been lost before, he was drowning now.

“I shall dream of you, Ruth,” he whispered fiercely.

Her blush deepened. She smiled faintly, before turning away, walking quickly down the hallway towards her room. Within seconds she had disappeared within.

He started walking towards his own chambers. When he climbed into his bed, he gazed up at the ceiling, lost in the sensual memory of her. He had fallen hard. And there was simply no return now. He couldn't stop what was between them even if he wanted to. And he didn't want to.

Ruth blew out the candle, climbing into the bed. She was shaking all over, infused with so many emotions that she could barely identify them.

There was shame intermingled with fear. But also, exhilaration and desire. A tangled, sticky web of emotions. She shuddered. It had all happened so quickly and unexpectedly that her mind was having a hard time processing it at all.

She sighed. Her response to his kiss and his hands upon her body had overwhelmed her. It was the very first time she had done such things with a man. She had never realised how strong and powerful desire could be. It was as if it had a life of its own.

She punched the pillow, trying to still her restless mind. But it was useless. She was wide awake, and sleep seemed a million miles away.

Her trembling intensified. When Patricia had cried out, sitting up in the bed, she had thought that they were doomed. How was her friend going to react to seeing them embracing in such an intimate way? She thought she was going to die from shame. But when it became apparent that Patricia was still asleep, she knew that they had been extremely lucky indeed. It could all have been so very different.

Suddenly, she burst into tears. She didn't know what she was going to do at all. This...connection between them had intensified to the point that she felt helpless beneath its fierce fire. And she was starting to realise that Lord Solton—Hugh, as he insisted she call him now—felt exactly the same. He was as swept away by it as she was. They were both powerless within its grip.

What on earth was she going to do?

She cried helplessly, releasing all the emotion. If Patricia wasn't so ill, she might simply pack up and leave Sandhurst Hall. She simply couldn't think clearly while she was around him. It was as if she was mired in quicksand. She needed to think about this alarming situation at a distance. But it was impossible, until her friend recovered.

If she recovered.

Gradually, she stopped sobbing. She felt worn out, completely and utterly drained. She would think about it all tomorrow. Wearily, she closed her eyes and finally slept.

The sun was shining brightly through the cracks of the curtains when Ruth next opened her eyes. Blearily, she sat up. She felt dazed, as if she had overslept. Her mind was so foggy she could barely string two thoughts together.

She jumped, as the door opened. Bessie the maid walked swiftly into the room. Her face was wreathed with smiles.

“Oh, miss,” she cried. “You are awake at last! I thought you were going to sleep the entire day away!”

Ruth smiled wearily. “What time is it, Bessie?”

“Past nine,” she said, her smile widening. “I came in at the usual time to rouse you, but you would not respond. I thought it best if you slept in a little. You obviously need it.”

Ruth nodded, ruefully rubbing her neck. She was slowly waking up.

“I have grand news,” the maid continued quickly. “Miss Poldark is awake and well! Her fever broke within the night. She is sitting up and speaking!”

Ruth’s heart quickened. “Oh, my! That is very good news indeed!”

The maid nodded. "Daphne, the maid that was attending her, was so surprised when she opened the door that she almost dropped the fresh linen she was carrying." She paused. "Miss Poldark is eager to see you. I said you would be in as soon as you are dressed."

Ruth smiled. Her heart was filled with sudden, intense joy. All the worry about Patricia suddenly drained away. Her dear friend had gotten through the worst of her fever and was now recovered. She could barely believe it was true.

She jumped out of bed, all of her lingering tiredness gone. She would think about what had happened between her and Hugh later. Patricia was well again and that was all that mattered for the moment.

Patricia was sitting up in bed, eating a boiled egg in a cup upon a tray, when Ruth entered the room. Her colour was so much better. She was still pale but not the deathly white she had been. Her friend smiled when she spotted her.

"Ruth!" she cried. Her voice was still a little croaky. "How lovely it is to see you!"

Ruth smiled widely. How good it was to see her friend not just awake and well, but seemingly in good spirits. It warmed her heart.

She sat down upon the bed, staring at her. "You look so much better," she said slowly. "You had us all worried, Patricia. Your fever was very high, and the physician said that if it did not break soon there was real danger."

Patricia nodded. "So, I have heard. He is coming to check upon me today apparently." She frowned slightly. "It is all a bit of a blur, Ruth. I can vaguely remember some things, but not others. And sometimes, I think I might be remembering dreams."

Ruth nodded. "I am not surprised. You were delirious on occasions. I suggested to the Earl that we write a letter to your family to inform them." Her smile broadened. "But that is all in the past now! You are well and it truly is all that matters."

Patricia smiled weakly. "I am well enough. I still have a rattling cough, but otherwise, my mind is clear, and I am not beset by fever any longer." She paused. "What has been happening while I have been sick?"

Ruth felt bright colour infuse her face. She could hardly tell her friend that Lord Solton had been pursuing her and she had capitulated. That she was now so close to him that he had asked her to call him by his Christian name. And that she had let him do shocking things to her in this very room, while Patricia was sleeping.

"Not very much," she said quickly, turning her face away. "The entire household has been centred around you, my dear friend. Trying to get you well again." She took a deep breath. "Your Aunt Clementine was sick too, but not as badly as you. I am sure she shall be well enough to come and see you this morning."

Patricia nodded. "Yes, she sent word that she will be coming soon," she said thoughtfully. "I am so very glad to hear that she did not get as sick as me. It might have been fatal in a lady her age." She paused. "And how is Lord Solton? Did he attend me closely?"

Ruth's heart flipped, seeing the look of expectation on her friend's face. It was obvious that her illness had not dissuaded her from her purpose to ensnare him. Not at all. And she didn't know how to respond in a normal way. This situation had just gotten more complicated...as if it wasn't thorny enough already.

Chapter 12

Ruth walked into the drawing room. Patricia was already seated there, working away on an embroidery patch. Her friend was dressed in an elegant, pale-yellow muslin gown, her golden hair curling around her face in tight ringlets. It was still so gratifying to see Patricia up and about and looking so well.

It was a week since her friend had woken up from her fever. At first, Patricia had still been weak and had only come down once or twice a day. But now, she was fully herself again. The only evidence that she had been ill was a lingering cough, but even that was almost gone.

Ruth gazed around the room. Aunt Clementine was here, as well, sitting in a corner with her knitting. She was making bootees for one of the maid's babies now. She was also quite recovered. She smiled absently at Ruth; her needles click clacking loudly.

"Ruth," said Patricia, smiling widely. "There you are. I thought you were never coming down."

Ruth forced a smile onto her face. She had probably lingered too long over her toilette this morning. But it was becoming harder to face her friend, even though she still cared for her as much as ever. It was the guilt and the shame that was consuming her. The fact that she was carrying on with Hugh behind Patricia's back.

She took a deep breath. Many times, she had resolved to just tell her friend. But she always lost courage at the last minute. Patricia was as intent on Hugh as ever. It was practically the only thing she talked about now. How could she tell her dear friend that he wasn't

interested in her at all in that way? And that instead he was interested in Ruth?

She couldn't. She simply couldn't.

It wasn't as if she thought Patricia's heart would be broken. Her friend's interest in Hugh was purely mercenary, even though she often commented about how tall and handsome he was. But that wasn't Patricia's main concern. It was Hugh's title and wealth which was attracting her friend to him. A fact which Patricia did not seem embarrassed about at all.

It was all so complex. She couldn't even tell Hugh that one of the reasons she couldn't openly court him was because of Patricia. She didn't want Hugh to despise her friend for being so mercenary. And so, she was playing a very complicated dance between them. A dance which she just wished would end.

She had asked Patricia repeatedly if they could return to London. But her friend always resisted, saying she needed to take advantage of this opportunity with Lord Solton. Sometimes, Ruth had thought she should just tell Patricia that she was returning home alone. That Patricia and Aunt Clementine could stay on if they wished but she really couldn't.

Ruth took another deep breath. The situation was intolerable. And it was getting worse by the day. Hugh insisted he truly cared for and wished to court her openly, but she simply could not do it. Not yet, at any rate. She must approach the situation carefully. Perhaps once they were back in London, Patricia would find some other potential suitor and forget all about him. And then her friend would not be quite so devastated by the fact Ruth and Lord Solton were serious about each other.

She could only hope.

Ruth sat down upon the sofa opposite her friend. "What do you feel like doing today, dearest?" she asked. "I was thinking we could take a short walk through the gardens. Nothing very strenuous. Or perhaps an excursion into a local village?"

Patricia put down her embroidery patch. "An excursion sounds lovely. But not until later." She smiled. "You may think me quite mad, but I have a strange yearning to sing this morning. I thought we could sing some songs together, while you play on the pianoforte. What do you think?"

Ruth smiled. "I think that sounds perfectly lovely too!" She paused, gazing warmly at her friend. "It is so wonderful that your health and spirits have recovered so much. A week ago, you would not have been able to sing at all, even if you had the inclination."

Patricia laughed merrily. "It is true! But I feel as fit as a fiddle now and simply bursting with energy." She glanced behind at Aunt Clementine, before lowering her voice. "I just had to tell you, dearest. Lord Solton suggested the singalong and will join us very soon for it. I think it is most definitely a step in the right direction. What do you think?"

Ruth's heart sank. If she had known that Hugh was going to join them, she would have made an excuse not to do it. It was so very painful watching Patricia make a play for him when they were all gathered together and see Hugh completely oblivious to it. But it never discouraged her friend at all. She simply sprang back more determined than ever.

“Perhaps,” she replied, in a vague voice. She hesitated, before plunging on. “But perhaps he was simply being kind, Patricia. Perhaps he does not care for you in that way. It would not be so very awful, would it? You are not head over heels in love with him, after all.”

Patricia’s mouth fell open. “It would be dreadful, Ruth. Simply dreadful. For I think that perhaps I *am* developing fond feelings for him.” She laughed awkwardly. “I know that it started out in a calculating way, but since then...well, my heart is starting to open, just a little. And he is such a fine catch. I simply *cannot* miss this opportunity.”

Ruth nodded miserably. She had tried and she had failed. And now it had gotten worse. Now, her friend fancied herself a little in love with him.

She could feel the beginnings of a headache coming on. She was almost tempted to tell her friend that she couldn’t do the singalong when Hugh strode into the room.

Her heart flipped over, just at the sight of him. It always did, even when it was only ten minutes since she had last seen him. He was so very handsome. The handsomest man she had ever met. And she knew now that the way she felt about him would never change.

She had fallen in love, pure and simple.

She hadn’t told him that yet. She hadn’t uttered those words aloud. And he hadn’t told her he loved her either. And yet, it was there between them, every time they secretly met. She knew that she could

trust him—that he had told her the truth. He wasn't merely dallying with her. She was certain.

"Ladies," he said, smiling widely. "I am at your disposal. Shall we commence?"

Patricia nodded, standing up. "Oh, yes, lets! This shall be so much fun, Lord Solton!" She smiled at him coquettishly. "I am thinking you are a tenor?"

"A baritone, actually, Miss Poldark," he replied. "And you?"

She laughed. "A soprano of course!" She turned to Ruth. "I have never asked you before, dearest. What are you?"

"The same as you, Patricia," said Ruth, trying to smile.

Patricia nodded, gazing at her. There was a small silence.

"Well, we are waiting for you to start playing," said Patricia, staring at Ruth pointedly. "If you go to the pianoforte our frivolity can begin!"

Ruth sighed heavily, standing up and walking towards the instrument. Aunt Clementine smiled at her encouragingly from her corner, her knitting needles still clacking. Ruth sighed again. How complicated life had become. And she didn't know how to resolve the situation at all.

Ruth flexed her fingers, before lowering them onto the keys. She felt strangely nervous. Patricia and Hugh were standing on either side of the pianoforte, staring at her expectantly. She took a deep breath and plunged into it.

They started out with *Black-eyed Susan*. It was a song that most people knew and could sing easily. They all started singing the first verse:

All in the downs the fleets were moor'd,

The streamers waving in the wind,

When black-eyed Susan came on board:

Oh! Where shall I my true love find?

Tell me jovial sailors, tell me true,

If my sweet William sails among the crew!

Ruth started to become lost in the music, as she always did. Her nerves dissipated. It was always like this. She wondered now why she

had been so nervous. It was just a few songs, after all. It would be over with in no time at all.

Hugh had a fine singing voice, deep and true. Patricia's was pleasant as well, if a bit thready. Ruth joined in, singing along with the others.

The first song finished. She launched into the next. They were five songs into the singalong when Ruth paused, trying to think of another. Suddenly, Aunt Clementine called out from her corner.

"Please play 'Lavender's Blue'," she said, her eyes sparkling. "It is one of my favourites and reminds me of my younger days." She sighed contentedly, nestling back in her chair.

Ruth smiled. "Lavender's Blue" was an old folk song and a perennial favourite, amongst young and old. It was also one of her mother's favourite songs as well. Ruth had played it often at home of an evening.

"Of course, Lady Clementine," she said.

She commenced the first notes. They all started singing the first verses, including Aunt Clementine, whose voice warbled like a swallow.

Lavender's blue, diddle, diddle,

Lavender's green,

When I am king, diddle, diddle,

I shall be your queen.

Lavender's green, diddle, diddle,

Lavender's blue,

You must love me, diddle, diddle,

Because I love you.

Ruth couldn't help it. Her eyes fixed on Hugh's as she sang. He was staring at her, as well, his voice ringing out. It was as if everyone else in the room had gone and there was only the two of them left. It was as if they were singing to each other alone.

Down in the vale, diddle, diddle,

Where flowers grow,

And the birds sing, diddle, diddle,

All in a row.

A brisk young man, diddle, diddle,

Met with a maid,

And laid her down, diddle, diddle,

Under the shade.

There they did play, diddle, diddle,

And kiss and court,

All the fine day, diddle, diddle,

Making good sport.

I've heard them say, diddle, diddle,

Since I came hither,

That you and I, diddle, diddle,

Might lie together.

Ruth felt the colour flame up in her cheeks again. Hugh's dark eyes were burning into her own. She well knew how much he wanted to lie with her...and she felt the same. Their kisses were so passionate that they could barely control themselves.

They sang the last of the verses. She stopped playing. The music faded away. They were still gazing ardently at each other. Suddenly, she came to her senses. It was as if she was emerging from a dream.

Patricia was staring at them, her head swivelling from one to the other, with an astonished look upon her face. Ruth reddened.

"What is going on here?" she demanded, in a high-pitched voice.

"What do you mean?" asked Ruth, her heart racing. Her stomach lurched sickeningly.

"I mean *what* is going on between the two of you?" Patricia's voice rose an octave higher. "Because *something* obviously is! The way that you were staring at each other...gazing into each other's eyes as if there is no one else in the room..."

Ruth tried to reply, but her voice had deserted her. She gazed helplessly at Hugh. His mouth was gaping, and he merely looked confused. It was obvious he couldn't understand why Patricia was reacting the way she was. But then, he wouldn't. He had no idea that she had set her cap at him and only recently decided she had feelings for him as well.

Patricia turned and ran out of the room.

Ruth stood up, so quickly that all the blood drained from her face.

"Ruth," whispered Hugh, frowning, coming towards her. "You look faint."

She couldn't answer him. She had to speak to Patricia and clear this up. Right now.

She turned and ran after her friend, up the staircase. She knew that Patricia would have retreated to her room. When she reached it, she took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. There was little point. She was so distressed she could barely think straight.

"Patricia," she called. Her voice came out as a squeak. "Can I come in?"

There was no response for a minute. And then she heard quick footsteps. The door reefered open. Patricia was standing there. Her face was a mask of fury. Silently, she opened the door wider, to allow Ruth entry.

Ruth's heart lurched violently. It had all gone so horribly wrong...and she still had no idea what was going to happen. Would Patricia stop being her friend entirely?

Patricia walked to the window. Ruth waited, her heart hammering. Her hands were slick with sweat, and she felt faint.

She waited, for her friend to turn around. Her mind started racing frantically. She could just deny it, of course. Tell Patricia that she didn't have a clue what she was talking about—that her friend must be imagining things. That would be the safer course of action and perhaps cause the least damage.

But Ruth just couldn't do it. She had been lying to her friend by omission this whole time. If she had just admitted that she had feelings for Hugh when it had first become apparent, then she wouldn't be in this mess. Patricia might still have been angry, but she would not be feeling deceived. There was a big difference.

She had to tell the truth. Come what may.

Eventually, Patricia turned. She had composed her face, but Ruth could still feel the anger simmering beneath the surface.

"Well?" demanded Patricia. "What have you to say?"

Ruth took a deep breath. "It is what you think," she said slowly, her heart racing harder. "I do have feelings for Lord Solton. And he returns them."

"What?" cried Patricia, all colour draining from her face. "You have been carrying on a little dalliance behind my back the whole time we have been at Sandhurst Hall?"

Ruth wrung her hands together. "Not the whole time! And I never intended it!" She took a deep, ragged breath. "Neither of us intended it. We tried so hard, for so long, to deny what is between us..."

Patricia walked up to her slowly. "Obviously, you did not try hard enough," she spat. Her blue eyes were glittering with fury. "You let me prattle on about how he admired me. I truly thought I had a chance with him. And now...you have made a complete fool of me. Both of you have."

"No," moaned Ruth, her eyes filling with tears. "No. He has no idea that you have designs upon him in that way. At least, he didn't before today." She hesitated. "I never intended to make a fool of you, Patricia. You are my friend. My dearest friend."

Patricia gave a short bark of laughter. "You do not know the meaning of the word, Ruth. I extended the hand of friendship to you. I invited you to accompany me here. I did it out of true regard and generosity. I saw something in you and thought that if you only had the chance to bloom, you could become truly become the lady you were born to be."

Ruth couldn't help it. With those words, her tears spilt over. She

sobbed into her hands for a moment. Patricia just watched her impassively.

When she had control of herself again, she stared at her friend pleadingly. "I do appreciate your friendship, Patricia. So very much. I did not intend to hurt you in this way." She took a deep breath. "Please. Can you forgive me?"

Patricia's face didn't show a flicker of emotion. "No, I do not think I can." But then, her eyes suddenly filled with tears. "Why am I so unlucky in these matters? Why cannot anything work out for me?"

"What do you mean?" asked Ruth, her heart lurching. "You shall find the gentleman who is meant for you one day, Patricia. You are beautiful, charming and have fortune. Everything is waiting for you. Do not take the fact that Lord Solton prefers me as a reflection upon you."

Patricia's face twisted. "Who would have thought it? I invite a poor girl, the daughter of my father's solicitor, to stay with me and she pulls the rug from under my feet entirely." Her face hardened. "You have played your hand well, Ruth. You are quite the consummate flirt, are you not?"

Ruth reeled back as if she had been struck. "I am not a flirt! Nor have I played any game! I speak the truth when I tell you this was not my intention. You are my friend, and I would never deliberately set out to hurt you. What more can I do to convince you of my sincerity?"

"Nothing," said Patricia, in a hard voice. "I do not want to listen to you any longer. Nor do I want to see your face again." She straightened, raising her chin. "I want you to go and pack your things

now, Ruth. I shall tell the Earl to order the carriage for first thing in the morning. I do not want you as my guest at Sandhurst Hall."

Ruth moaned in pain. "Please, I am so very sorry..."

"I thought you would be happy," said Patricia, raising her eyebrows. "You are the one, after all, who has been pestering me to leave Sandhurst Hall since I recovered from my sickness. You have your wish at last!"

Ruth felt faint. "The only reason I wanted to leave was because the situation was untenable," she said, in a small voice. "I wanted to get some distance from it, to think deeply about how to tell you that Lord Solton and I wish to formally court..."

Patricia gave another bark of laughter. "Is that what he told you? And you believed him? You are a fool, Ruth Middleton." She stared at Ruth incredulously. "He is a viscount. The son and heir of an earl! He will never condescend to marry the likes of you. You are poor and your family have no connections. How could you ever have thought such a thing?"

"No," said Ruth, shaking her head. "No, he promised me he is not dallying with me. That even though it took him a while to resolve the matter in his mind, he is now fully committed to openly courting me, once we have the chance."

Patricia burst out laughing. She put her hands on her hips, rocking with it. Ruth stared at her, appalled. When her mirth was finally done, Patricia wiped the corners of her eyes, staring at her.

“He will never marry you,” she said crisply. “Viscounts and earls just do not do such things. They marry proper ladies, with titles, or else wealthy heiresses. You are so very innocent, Ruth. You truly do not know how the world works, do you?”

Ruth turned away. Her head was spinning violently. She didn't know what to think anymore. Perhaps Patricia spoke the truth, or perhaps she was speaking out of pure spite. All she knew was that her friend had told her to go and pack her things and that she was leaving Sandhurst Hall in the morning.

Their friendship was lost.

She ran out of the room to her own. Once inside, she shut the door firmly, leaning against it. Within seconds, she was crying again as if her heart had broken into two.

She had wanted to leave Sandhurst Hall. But not under this shameful black cloud. Patricia despised her now and would never speak with her again. And she was suddenly deeply insecure that Hugh *did* want to honestly court her. And even if that had been his intention, how could she do it, knowing how Patricia felt on the matter?

She took a deep breath, wiping away her tears. It was done. She would never return to Sandhurst Hall. She would tell Hugh tomorrow that they must never see each other again. In truth, he would probably be relieved. It meant that he was no longer burdened with desire for her and could make a better choice for his future wife and countess. He would understand that in the long run. But the truth was he had probably been playing her, just as Patricia had said.

Her face twisted. Patricia was right. She *was* a fool. A stupid, innocent, naïve fool. She had forgotten her place and was now suffering the consequences. She would never make a mistake like this again.

Chapter 13

Ruth ripped down the gowns that were hanging in the wardrobe. She was so distraught that she didn't even bother to neatly fold them. She simply stuffed them into the open trunk on the floor. They looked forlorn and pitiful, like a bunch of rags.

Now that she had decided upon a course of action, she just needed to get out of here. She had decided that she would not wait for morning. As soon as she had finished packing, she would seek out the Earl and tell him that she needed to leave Sandhurst Hall at once.

She would make some excuse or other, perhaps tell him her mother was sick. He didn't need to know the truth. He had been kindness itself to her and she was so ashamed that she had to flee from his home like this.

Her heart lurched, thinking of Hugh. She didn't know what she was going to tell him about this whole mess. But she knew she couldn't leave his home without saying *something* to him. He was in the house. He had seen Patricia flee the drawing room. She couldn't lie about it, and besides, she owed him something.

She flung some bonnets into the trunk, where they lay like wilted butterflies. She almost felt like she was in the midst of a very bad dream. But she only had herself to blame for it. She had known how Patricia felt about Hugh, what her friend's intentions were towards him. It had been her own lack of honesty that had brought this situation to a head. The fact that she had never intended for any of it to happen hardly mattered any longer.

“What the deuce are you doing?” A sharp voice, in the doorway.

Ruth spun around, her chest heaving. It was Hugh. He was standing there, watching her. His incredulous eyes slowly settled upon the open trunk with all her gowns and accessories thrown haphazardly within. Then they slowly returned to her face.

She stood up and faced him. Her heart was hammering so loudly in her chest that she could hear nothing else for a moment.

“I am leaving Sandhurst Hall,” she replied eventually. “And I intend to be on my way within the hour.”

His eyes narrowed. He stepped into the room, closing the door behind him. He didn’t say a word.

Ruth took a deep, ragged breath. “Do not attempt to dissuade me. It truly is for the best and you shall come to see that in the fullness of time...”

He cursed underneath his breath, striding towards her. His eyes were glittering dangerously.

“No, I shall not arrive at that conclusion,” he said sharply. He stared down at the trunk again. “This is madness, Ruth. You cannot just pack up and leave in this manner. What did she say to you? What did she do to you?”

Ruth sighed. "She is very upset and has good reason to be," she said slowly. "You see, Patricia has had designs upon you for herself, since the night of that ball." She raised her chin, as a tremor swept through her. "I should have told you. Or else I should have told her, since it became apparent we were developing feelings for each other. If I had just been honest with everyone then none of this would have happened."

He looked askance. "She has *designs* upon me?"

Ruth nodded slowly. "She does. She believed that you were partial towards her at the ball. And she grasped that perceived partiality to her heart and has run with it. She truly thinks that you shall one day make her an offer of marriage."

"Ruth," he said, shaking his head incredulously. "You know that is not true! I do not think of her in that way at all and never have. Regardless of what she believes, it shall never happen. You must believe me."

Ruth's eyes filled with tears again. "I *do* believe you. But that is hardly the point any longer. Patricia thinks I wilfully betrayed her, setting my sights upon you, behind her back. She confided in me about her feelings and intentions towards you and she cannot understand that I never intended for any of this to happen."

Hugh swore again softly. He looked murderously angry.

"Ruth, this is madness," he said, in a low voice. "I do not care what her feelings towards me are. I do not reciprocate them and never will. You cannot just leave because her feelings have been hurt. She will come to understand that she has set her cap at the wrong gentleman. I

do not believe for one minute that her feelings towards me are anything but superficial, anyway. There has never been any connection between us.”

Ruth was silent, gazing out the window. She wanted to burst into tears again. It was so very hard, standing here and listening to this. She wanted him to comfort her. She wanted to fold herself into his arms and tell her that everything would be alright. She wanted so desperately to believe that.

But it *wasn't* alright and it probably never would be. Patricia felt monstrously betrayed. Even if her friend hadn't ordered her from the house, it would be impossible to stay now. The hurt was too raw.

“It is impossible,” she said slowly, turning back to him. “The tension is too much. I hope that one day I might be able to repair our friendship, but that time is not now. Patricia needs me gone and I think it is the best thing all round as well. I am sorry.”

He gazed at her pleadingly. She gathered all her strength and looked him in the eye.

“Please, do not try to stop me,” she continued, in a small voice. “I am resolute upon the matter.”

He shook his head, his lips a thin line of disapproval. “Tell me at least that you still feel the same way about me,” he whispered. “Tell me that this has not changed what is between us.”

She stared at him. “I cannot tell you that. It *has* changed what is

between us.”

“No,” he whispered ardently. “No! Just because she has decided that she admires me? I do not reciprocate her feelings, Ruth! It is ludicrous to decide that there can be nothing between us because of how she feels. It is not a competition between you both. I cannot stress that strongly enough.”

She sighed heavily. “Hugh, I understand that. I have already told you that. But it no longer matters. Patricia feels betrayed. I have not been a good friend to her.” She took a deep, ragged breath. “Her friendship matters to me, more than I can say. If it were not for Patricia, we would not have even met. I am ashamed that I have been such a poor friend to her and must endeavour to make it up to her.”

“So that is the price we must pay?” he breathed, shaking his head again. “Because you feel bad that you have not been a good friend to her, we must give up everything that is between us?”

She nodded her head slowly. She felt as if her heart was breaking into tiny pieces. As if every last vestige of feeling was being squeezed out of it.

“Yes,” she replied, almost choking on the word. “Yes. But it is more than that as well. You know the reasons we cannot continue.”

He frowned. “Do I? I do not believe so.”

She laughed shortly. “Hugh, you are a viscount. One day you shall be an earl. And I am not worthy of consideration. I am poor and obscure.

I am barely a lady. You know it as well as I do.” She paused. “You have forgotten, in the heat of the moment. As I did. We wanted it to be possible so desperately that we pushed the world away. But it was always there, waiting for us. It is here now.”

He looked pained. “Ruth...”

She stepped back, shaking her head firmly. “No, Hugh. Do not appeal to me anymore. My mind is made up. I must leave Sandhurst Hall this very day. I came as Patricia’s guest and she wants me to leave. I intend to honour her wish. It is the very least I can do, after all the pain I have caused her.”

He gazed out the window, looking mutinous. She held her ground, even though it was tearing her to pieces. It was imperative that she leave Sandhurst Manor now, for Patricia’s sake. She would not wait.

“Can you meet me halfway?” he said eventually, turning back to her. “I understand that you feel you must leave Sandhurst Hall. But could I persuade you to stay for just one night at a local inn? I want to appeal to Miss Poldark myself and see if I can resolve this situation.”

She gave a painful sigh. “Hugh, there is no point. Nothing shall change...”

“Just give me one day and night,” he pleaded. “That is all. If nothing has changed by tomorrow morning then you can return home.”

She frowned. For the life of her she could not see why he had made this strange request. The journey from Essex to London was not so

very far. She could be back and safely ensconced within her own home before nightfall. She didn't need to stay at an inn to break her journey. It wasn't as if she was travelling from Scotland or some other far flung place.

But his jaw was set in a determined line. Her heart softened. It would make little difference but he had set his heart upon it. And perhaps it would finally make him realise the truth of what she was saying. Perhaps if she did this for him he would become resolved to the situation and let her go in peace.

"I will do as you ask," she said slowly. "One night. And then I must return to my home on the morrow."

He nodded quickly. "I shall make the arrangements then. I shall order the carriage and accompany you myself to the inn, to see that you are settled."

She sighed again. "Hugh, that is not necessary..."

"But it is," he said shortly. "I shall go and do it all now. Be ready at the front door within the hour. I shall speak to my father as well, telling him you have a family crisis you must attend to."

She nodded, biting her lip. Without another word, he swept out of the room.

She stared down at her trunk. Hugh was just delaying the inevitable, if he thought he could persuade her to change her mind. But it was only one night and it wasn't much so very much to give him, after all. Not

after what they had meant to each other.

She fell down onto her knees, closing the trunk with a definitive click. It was like she had just closed the lid on a chapter of her life. A chapter that she had never expected. A chapter full of joy and heartbreak, in equal measures. A chapter that she would never forget, as long as she lived.

The Earl and Lady Clementine were waiting to farewell her on the front steps. Hugh was busy organising the carriage, making sure her trunk was securely attached. She didn't know what lies he had told them both, to explain her abrupt departure.

"I am very sorry to see you leave, my dear," said the Earl, taking her hands. "You have been a wonderful house guest. I hope that your dear mother feels well again soon."

Ruth nodded, biting her lip. "As do I, My Lord. Thank you for your kind hospitality. Your house is splendid. I have had the time of my life."

He smiled crookedly. "It is not bad, is it? You must come and stay again soon. Do you promise?"

She took a deep breath. "I shall try."

Lady Clementine kissed her softly on both cheeks. "I hope you have a safe journey, my dear."

Then she was climbing into the carriage. Hugh mounted his horse, to accompany the carriage to the inn. She had no idea where it was, or even the name of it. But she knew he would take care of her and make sure that she was safe. She hardly thought he would leave her at a rough roadside tavern for the night.

The driver cracked the whip, and the carriage lurched away, down the long driveway. Tears sprang into her eyes, as she gazed out the window at the grand house. It would be the last time she ever saw it. To think, that she had stayed as a guest in such a place. It had been beyond her wildest dreams then and it still was the stuff of dreams.

Her heart lurched. But one had to wake up from dreams eventually.

She stared up at the second storey of the house. And that was when she spotted Patricia's pale face in the window, gazing down. Her friend's mouth was set in a grim line. There was no smile, no friendly farewell wave. It was obvious Patricia hadn't calmed down, nor changed her mind about Ruth, in any way. She was glad to see the back of her.

A pain settled in Ruth's heart. She had handled everything so very badly. She deserved this. And one of the prices she must pay for lying to her friend was the loss of her friendship.

The carriage rattled over the moat. Ruth resolutely turned to the front, letting Sandhurst Hall fall away from her forever.

Only half an hour later the carriage started to slow down, as they passed through a small village. Ruth jumped, staring out the window. The carriage was pulling up outside a large inn. It was built in the lavish Tudor style, with a sharply vaulting roof with many gables and crisscrossing timber over the façade, and many rectangular windows.

She waited patiently in the stationary vehicle. Suddenly, Hugh was at the door of the carriage, opening it himself. He took her hand, assisting her from it. She gazed around. There was a tall wrought iron post near the front of the inn, from which swung a painted sign, proclaiming that its name was The Red Rose.

She smiled, despite her pain. It was an apt name, given their shared interest in the War of the Roses. Had he deliberately chosen this inn for the name?

“I thought you would appreciate it,” he said, watching her eyes widen as she read the sign. “How could you resist staying in The Red Rose?”

Her heart lurched. He was trying so hard, to keep their fragile connection going. And she didn’t have the heart, right in this moment, to tell him it was all for naught. Perhaps she shouldn’t have agreed to this. Perhaps, it was just prolonging their pain.

“Shall we go in?” she asked, in a bright, false voice.

A look of pure pain crossed his face. But he nodded, escorting her into

the inn. After he had secured her room and made sure that her trunk was safely delivered to it, he turned to face her.

“I am going to return to Sandhurst Hall now,” he said quickly. “I intend to speak to Miss Poldark to resolve this situation at once.”

She bit her lip. “As you wish. But it shall not work.”

He glowered into the distance. “You do not know that. I shall return to inform you of my progress this afternoon...”

She took a deep breath, feeling as if a hundred tiny darts had just pierced her heart. It was hopeless. She should never have agreed to this. It was just prolonging the pain for both of them. But it was too late now.

At any rate, she knew she would be gone tomorrow. It was not so very long to wait.

“Rest in your room,” he said abruptly. “I shall return when I can.”

He turned and left without another word.

Ruth sighed, climbing the rickety staircase and entering her room. It was surprisingly large but quite dark, with only one small rectangular window, looking out upon the street below. She sat down upon the bed, staring at the wall. She didn't know what to do with herself now. It was hours before dinner, which Hugh had already booked for her in

the dining room, paying for it along with everything else.

Abruptly, she stood up. She would go for a walk in the village. It would give her something to do, and perhaps soothe her mind just a little.

The village was indeed small. Only one long street. She passed tearooms, a bakery and a blacksmith shop, before finding the town square. There was a small park overlooking a lake, which was really just a large pond. She sat down upon a bench, gazing out over the water despondently.

She was all alone, for probably the very first time in her life. But she didn't feel frightened. She knew that she was under Hugh's protection here. He had booked the room for her and accompanied her inside the inn.

Everyone knew she was associated with him and would behave deferentially towards her because of it. It was one of the many advantages of being titled, wealthy and a pillar of the local community.

She smiled wryly. It would probably be the last time in her life she would be treated in this way. For, like Cinderella, on the stroke of midnight she would return to being just herself again. As soon as she was home, all the trappings of privilege would be gone. Miss Ruth Middleton would no longer be the friend of the upper classes.

For the first time, she thought of her parents. They were going to be shocked by her abrupt return. And she must tell them the truth of what happened, why she had been forced to leave Sandhurst Hall so quickly. She had learnt her lesson, well and truly. She was never going

to lie, by design or omission, ever again. If they were disappointed and angry with her, then so be it.

A lady and gentleman were walking arm in arm along the path around the lake, accompanied by a small boy, who was throwing a red ball into the air and catching it. Ruth smiled. It was obviously a young family. The couple leaned into each other, whispering intently. And then, the gentleman reached out, tucking a stray hair behind the lady's ear.

Ruth's heart twisted. It was clear, through that one small gesture, how much love there was between them. It was a love match. She gasped, as tears filled her eyes. It was as if it had struck her anew. She had been trying to be so very brave about it. But now, she leaned forward, as fresh pain entered her heart.

She would never have what was between that couple. Her only chance at true love was gone now. It had been unlikely in the extreme that she had even found it at all.

A single tear trickled down her cheek. It had always been going to end this way, through one way or another. It was just that Patricia discovering what was between them had precipitated it, that was all. How could she mourn the loss of something that had always been inevitable?

And yet, she did. She sat there, all alone on that park bench, mourning the loss of what could never be. Of what was gone from her forever. The possibility of true love such as existed between the couple. She would never walk around a lake, arm in arm with Hugh, watching a small boy catching a red ball. It was like watching every hope vanishing entirely.

Chapter 14

Hugh leant over the horse, urging it onwards down the road, back towards the village where he had left Ruth. It had taken longer at Sandhurst Hall than he had anticipated. He cursed underneath his breath. This whole appalling situation had turned everything upside down.

He grimaced, thinking back on his encounter with Miss Patricia Poldark. He had found her in the parlour, when he had returned to the Hall, working on an embroidery patch. He had marched in, confronting her. He didn't have time to mince words.

"Miss Poldark," he had said. "Might I speak to you?"

She nodded slowly. "Of course, My Lord," she had said stiffly. "I am at your complete disposal."

He nodded, sitting down opposite her. "You know, of course, that Miss Middleton has left Sandhurst Hall," he said. "She told me that you insisted she leave."

Patricia nodded cautiously. "I did. I find that I no longer wish to pursue a friendship with Miss Middleton. We are quite at odds and cannot be reconciled."

He tried to hold back the surge of anger he felt at her words. "I wonder why you would be so hasty, Miss Poldark," he said quickly. "Miss Middleton has been a devoted friend to you. She sat by your

bedside constantly while you were ill. She loves you dearly.”

Patricia flushed. “She has *pretended* to be a devoted friend. But I am afraid that friends do not do what Miss Middleton has done.” She gazed steadily at Hugh. “Please, do not make me be indelicate and talk of it with you. It is painful enough without reliving it, Lord Solton.”

Hugh nodded. “We do not have to go into particulars, Miss Poldark. I know enough about the situation to understand it.” He paused. “Miss Middleton is devastated that she inadvertently hurt you, Miss Poldark. She never intended to. I wonder if you could find it within your heart to reconcile with her? It would mean the world to her.”

Patricia’s face tightened. “How close you have become. Do you speak on her behalf, now? What an odd situation.” She laughed bitterly. “She is only the daughter of a solicitor, you know. She was fortunate indeed to even be invited to stay here. And yet, she wilfully betrayed my good faith in her. I believe it shows Miss Middleton’s true colours, well and truly.”

“Miss Middleton has exceptional character,” he shot back. “Are you truly talking in such a condescending way about her background? I think that shows *your* true colours, if I might speak plainly, Miss Poldark.”

Her flush deepened. “I gave her a chance. She threw it away. It is as simple as that. And if she has asked you to intercede on her behalf with me, then you can tell her that it is all for naught. I shall never be friends with Miss Ruth Middleton again.”

He scowled at her. She was being so very obstinate. And she didn’t

want to talk about the reasons behind why she felt so betrayed with him. Being a gentleman, he couldn't push the issue with her. But how could he tell her, in as delicate a way as possible, that her intentions regarding him would never bear fruit? That she was misguided to think that he would ever consider courting her?

He stared at her, contemplating it. Miss Poldark's nose was very much out of joint. But telling her he would never consider courting her—that he preferred Ruth over her, in every way—would only inflame the situation. She already felt affronted and rejected. She had turned it into some kind of competition between her and Ruth. And the fact that Ruth came from an inferior background to her own was just salt in the wound.

He sighed heavily. He couldn't for the life of him work out why she had set her cap at him so firmly. He had never flirted with her at all. The fact that he had stayed by her side at the ball didn't change that fact. He had only been acting protectively, after what had happened to Ruth. Miss Poldark had misinterpreted that, and from that one evening of polite attention, all this had sprung. And he hadn't even realised.

"I am sorry you feel that way," he said carefully. "I believe that Miss Middleton is a loyal and true friend to you. And she is hurting, very much, over losing your good opinion of her. I ask you once again: could you not find it in your heart to put whatever issue you have with her aside and forgive her?"

Patricia set her mouth stubbornly. "I cannot, Lord Solton. I gave Miss Middleton every chance to prove herself a good friend. She has been deceitful and if she were now here she would still be lying to me. It was only because I confronted her that she was forced to admit the truth." She exhaled slowly. "It is far better that she has left Sandhurst Hall...for all concerned." She stared at him pointedly.

He bristled. "Are you referring to me? You claim it is better that she is not here on my account?"

Patricia gave a short laugh. "Oh, My Lord. I see she has entangled you in her web, by playing the wide eyed ingenue. But the truth is now clear to me. Miss Middleton is a fortune hunter who will let nothing stand in the way of her pursuits to marry above her station. Not even friendship."

He took a deep, calming breath. It angered him to hear Ruth described thus. She was no fortune hunter. If anything, she was so humble, so painfully modest and believing herself undeserving of attention. She had tried so very hard to resist what was happening between them, because she felt it was hopeless, and that she did not deserve to be singled out in such a way.

He knew now that there was another reason she had tried to resist him. It was because of this lady sitting in front of him. A lady who was stubbornly refusing to give Ruth the benefit of the doubt. And now, he was under threat of losing Ruth completely, because of her loyalty to this lady. Because she didn't want to cause her any more pain.

But watching the unyielding face of the lady, he knew that he could push her no further. Not for the moment, at any rate. Ruth was right. Miss Poldark needed time for her anger to lessen. Perhaps she would start to think clearly about it all once the situation calmed.

Ruth could not come back to Sandhurst Hall. Not now, at any rate. Not unless he wanted to turf Miss Poldark out, which he could not do. She was the guest of his father, a distant relation. The Earl would never tolerate it. And besides, Ruth would never condone such an action. She wouldn't return here as their guest if Miss Poldark was

not.

He stood up. "I am sorry you believe that. I do not believe her to be any such thing. I shall leave you, Miss Poldark. Thank you for listening to me."

He was just about out the door when she called out to him. He turned and gazed at her enquiringly.

"You besmirch your good name by associating with her," she said, her face twisting. "All the world will think you a fool, to have been so beguiled by an obscure fortune hunter, for I shall let everyone know what Miss Ruth Middleton's true character is. You shall be a laughingstock amongst the beau monde, Lord Solton. Remember that."

He glared at her. Was she *threatening* him? It rather seemed like she was. Miss Patricia Poldark was telling him that if he pursued Ruth she would spread malicious gossip about her. And he was mindful that probably everyone would believe her. Patricia Poldark was from very good family and wealthy. Of course, they would believe her. No one would give Ruth the benefit of the doubt at all.

"I think you are overwrought, Miss Poldark," he shot back. "Think very carefully before you slander someone's character. I wish you a good day."

Hugh's hands tightened on the reins of the horse, now, just thinking about the encounter. He had wanted to fix the situation, to bring Ruth news that her friend forgave her, with the hope that she would consider him again. But it hadn't turned out that way at all.

Patricia Poldark was obstinate that she would never forgive her, and was even threatening to slander her name. But he would never tell Ruth that. He didn't want to cause her anymore pain.

He slowed down, as he reached the village, heading towards The Red Rose inn. He had never felt more bereft in his life. For Ruth was going to head back to London tomorrow. And he had no idea any longer if he could convince her to still consider him as a suitor. It seemed that all was lost.

He took her into the main dining area of the tavern. There were a few people dining and drinking at booths and tables in the large room, but it was mostly empty. He knew that he should not be seen in public with her without a chaperone, but he was past caring. How was he to know if she would ever see him again?

Ruth was pale and quiet, sipping her drink. His face twisted with chagrin. He just wanted to lean over and take her hand. But of course, he could do no such thing.

"How is Patricia?" she asked, in a small voice.

He shook his head sorrowfully. "I tried to talk with her, to beseech her to forgive you for your supposed betrayal, but she would not listen to me, Ruth. She has determined that you have done her wrong." He laughed in a brittle way. "And it is all for nothing. If only she could see that."

Ruth's eyes swam with tears. "Yes, I was afraid so. She is furious with me. My only hope is that one day she shall find it in her heart to forgive me." She hung her head.

Another wave of hopeless anger swept over Hugh. He gazed at her beseechingly.

"Ruth, please do not say this means the end of what is between us," he whispered. "We cannot help now that Miss Poldark has decided to be so vehement towards you. But you never intended to do her wrong and there is no wrong done in any case." He was so frustrated he could barely speak. "Do not throw it all away because her pride has been hurt."

Ruth stared at him. "You know I cannot continue to hurt her. It would confirm to her that I never valued her friendship. You must understand that. It is impossible."

He felt like slamming his fist into the table. "I shall fix this. I shall turn Miss Poldark's mind and then we can be together..."

"No." Her voice was firm. "You just said you tried to talk to her and she would not listen. You will only make things worse. Her pride is wounded, as you said. If you advocate on my behalf it shall just confirm in her mind that I have you twisted around my little finger. She shall despise me even more than she does now."

He shook his head. "No, there *must* be a way..."

“There is not.” To his surprise, she stood up. “Thank you for trying and coming to tell me. I appreciate the efforts you have made on my behalf. But it is hopeless.” She took a deep, ragged breath. “I shall not prolong this any further. I shall be heading to London first thing tomorrow. I bid you farewell.”

“Ruth,” he said, stung. “You cannot leave me in such a cold way.”

“I must,” she said, raising her chin. “You shall thank me for it one day. It was never meant to be between us. Fate has intervened and we must listen to it.”

To his horror, she walked quickly out of the room. He was so stunned he simply gaped at the door that she had just walked through.

No, he thought desperately. *It is not the end. It cannot be.*

He waited to see if she would walk back through the door to him. But it remained firmly closed. Ruth was telling him it *was* indeed the end. How had it come to this?

Ruth was trembling like a leaf when she closed the door to her room, leaning heavily against it. It had been so hard to walk away from him; to tell him it was over between them. She didn't think she would have the strength to resist his appeals, but she had.

A single tear trickled down her cheek. She had known that Patricia would not forgive her, that he had interceded on her behalf for nothing. And yet, a small pang of hope had entered her heart, before he had spoken. Perhaps her friend had calmed down and realised it was simply wounded pride and that Ruth had never intended to hurt her. Perhaps they could recover their friendship.

But all hope was lost, as soon as he had opened his mouth.

She took a deep breath. It was better—far better—this way. A clean break. She must not offer him any encouragement. He would realise in the fullness of time that it was all for the best. In a week or a month, he would probably rue the fact he had ever considered her in such a way. He would laugh and call it madness.

If only she could. But she knew the wound ran far deeper than that.

Suddenly, there was a sharp rap on the door. Without thinking, she opened it, just a crack. It was him. He was standing there, his face implacable.

“What...what are you doing?” she whispered.

He pushed through the crack, closing the door quickly behind him. Her heart started to race frantically. He took her by the shoulders, staring at her imploringly.

“You cannot be here,” she whispered. “You must leave.”

“Not before you have heard me out,” he whispered back. “I shall not give up, Ruth. You cannot tell me it is over between us. I will not accept it. I will find a way. If it takes a month or a year, I will find it. Do not give up on me.”

She turned her face away, breathing heavily. How she wanted to believe him. Every fibre of her being screamed out for it. This was truly appalling. Her trembling increased, until she felt like she was consumed by it.

Slowly, as if in a dream, he pulled her towards him. His lips descended upon her own. The kiss was fierce and sweet, full of his pent up longing. She knew instinctively that nothing had changed between them. The fire was still there and nothing could extinguish it.

She knew she should pull away. But she was helpless before the onslaught. She felt as if she was drowning and there was nothing to hold onto.

He tilted her chin, deepening the kiss, groaning in his throat. Her knees turned to water; she felt like she was going to collapse. He gripped her tighter, making her feel his arousal. A pang of answering desire leapt to life within her belly, fanning outwards.

He was kneading her breasts frantically. And then, he suddenly pulled the bodice of her gown aside, so that they were exposed. His eyes were glittering fiercely as he dipped his head, taking a nipple into his mouth and suckling deeply.

Her head tilted back and she groaned with need. Those delicious sensations intensified, sweeping through her. She felt delirious with it,

as if she were beset by fever. How could she ever live without this? How could she live without him touching her and kissing her and loving her in this agonising way?

But slowly, she was coming to her senses. She was still delirious, but she pushed him away. He stared at her, confused, his face a rictus of desire.

“No,” she whispered, her eyes filling with tears. “No. It is selfish and it is pointless.”

“Ruth,” he whispered, reaching for her.

She quickly stepped back. It took more effort and strength than she ever knew she possessed. All she wanted to do was stay in his arms forever. But it simply wasn't possible.

“You need to leave, Hugh,” she whispered. “I have made my choice.”

She took a deep, shuddering breath, opening the door. “Please. I do not want to beg you.”

He stared at the door. For a moment, she thought he was going to refuse. Then he cursed underneath his breath, striding out. She closed the door quickly. Tears were streaming down her face and she made no effort to stop them. She no longer cared.

Slowly, she walked to the small rectangular window. She saw his

horse, tethered to a post outside the inn. Within minutes, he was there, mounting it. His face was thunderous. He didn't look up at the window. He simply rode off down the road, as if the very hounds of hell were upon his tail.

He was gone.

She slithered to the floor, hugging herself tightly. That had been a very close call. She had almost submitted to him, let herself be swept away by the fierce desire between them. If she had submitted she knew she would never forgive herself. She *must* stand firm.

She kept crying, sobbing, letting all of her pain out. She would never love someone like she loved him. But she had loved and lost. It had never been possible between them. She knew that. It was for the best—it truly was.

She was the biggest fool that had ever lived, to have ever entertained the notion that it was possible. To have been so completely swept away by his interest in her that she had forgotten her friend. Patricia was hurt and insulted and it was all her fault. She was the one who had caused her dear friend such pain and she would spend her whole life alone if she must to make up for it. To show her that she did love her dearly and had never wished to cause her pain.

Slowly, she stopped sobbing, wiping away her tears. She had been a fool as well to have agreed to staying here, for hoping there was a small chance that things work out. If she hadn't agreed to it she would already be home.

Suddenly, she wanted to be home, with every morsel of her being. She wanted to be safe and forget all about what had happened at

Sandhurst Hall. She wanted to put it behind her forever. Must she truly wait another night before she could?

She turned, walking quickly to the opened trunk in the corner, closing it tightly. She would send word to prepare the carriage now. It was still daylight. She could be home by early evening. She didn't want to spend the night here alone, with it all tumbling through her mind, over and over.

She didn't think that Hugh would come back. But if he did, she would be gone. Temptation would be gone. And they both desperately needed it gone. He *would* understand, in the fullness of time, that this was all for the best. Her heart twisted. And he could move on to a more appropriate lady, at long last.

Chapter 15

The gaslights had just been turned on, by the time the carriage pulled up outside the house in Cheapside. Ruth gazed out the window, blinking rapidly. It hadn't been a long journey at all but she felt as if she had been travelling forever.

Her heart flipped over. She was home, at long last.

She saw the curtain in the parlour window twitch and the pale face of her mother, gazing out. Her eyes widened in shock. The next minute, the front door was open and she was rushing out to the carriage.

"Ruth," she cried, staring at her as if she was a ghost. "What are you doing here?"

Ruth smiled faintly. "I shall explain everything soon, Mama. But I am tired. Can I rest for a moment first?"

"Of course," cried her mother, assisting her from the carriage.

Within minutes, she was ensconced in the parlour near the fire. Tea had been called. And the next minute, her father was there, staring at her in exactly the same way that her mother had. Both her parent sat down, waiting patiently. It was only after the tea arrived and she had drunk her first cup that either of them spoke.

“You journeyed alone?” asked her father, raising an eyebrow. “Is Miss Poldark still at Sandhurst Hall?”

She placed down her cup. All she wanted to do was go to bed. But she knew she must get this out of the way. She had vowed to herself that she would tell the truth from now on and it must start now. She wasn't going to skirt around it, even if it shocked and horrified her parents.

“Yes, Miss Poldark is still at Sandhurst Hall,” she said slowly, facing them. “She asked me to leave and as her guest I could not refuse.” She paused. “Nor did I wish to.”

Her parents exchanged looks. They seemed confounded, but they waited for her to keep speaking. She took a deep breath. This wasn't easy, but she must continue.

“We quarrelled,” she said, her heart lurching. “You see, she was very offended that Lord Solton—the Viscount Dalrymple, and the heir to the earldom of Montbatten—preferred my company to her own. In fact, she was livid.”

Her parents gasped in shock.

“I do not understand,” said her mother faintly. “You quarrelled because she was angry that this Lord Solton liked you rather more than her?”

Ruth nodded wearily. “She was convinced that he was partial to her and set her sights upon him,” she said slowly. “But she fell ill, and

Lord Solton and I grew close in that time. I never intended to hurt her. But she deduced our regard for one another and was insulted. She thought it a betrayal.”

“Oh, dear,” said her mother, her eyes wide. “You have offended her!”

Her father stared at her steadily. “And what of this Lord Solton? What did he have to say about this sorry state of affairs?”

Ruth took a deep breath. “He thinks it a shame that Patricia is so offended, but he never sought to encourage her to believe he was partial to her. He did not want me to leave Sandhurst Hall.” She took another deep breath. “He still wishes to continue our association, but I have told him it is impossible, of course.”

Her parents were silent as they digested it. She could see how shocked they were. They valued Patricia’s patronage of her so very much. They had seen it as Ruth’s entrée into the world of the beau monde. She knew they would be angry with her that she had lost the friendship and she couldn’t blame them.

“I hope to recover our friendship one day,” she said, in a small voice. “Because Patricia has become like a sister to me and I love her dearly. I never wanted to hurt her. I hope she can see that when things have calmed down.”

Her father sighed heavily. “It is rather a tangled web. I am just hoping that this Lord Solton has not compromised your reputation, Ruth. Or that anything of what has occurred at Sandhurst Hall has done so. That would be a very great shame indeed.”

"I blame myself," said her mother, dabbing at her eyes with her handkerchief. "You are very young and innocent, daughter. I trusted that the chaperonage of Lady Clementine would be sufficient but obviously it was not. I should have insisted I chaperone you myself..."

"I have not compromised my reputation," said Ruth quickly, hoping that she was telling the truth. "You do not need to worry, Mama. But I am filled with sorrow at what has happened and wished it was different. But there is nothing more that I can do. I just hope and pray that Patricia will forgive me one day."

"As do we all," said her father, frowning. "Poldark is one of our biggest clients. If he gets wind of this and decides to be insulted on his daughter's behalf, we could suffer." He paused. "But we shall cross that bridge when we come to it, if need be. The only thing we need to do now is contain the damage. You did the right thing in coming straight home, Ruth."

Ruth nodded, biting her lip. It was on the tip of her tongue to tell them she *hadn't* come straight home—that Lord Solton had paid for her to stay in a local inn for the night, to see if he could fix things—but she decided not to. They wouldn't understand. All they would see was that she might have been compromised and she didn't want to give them any more reason to worry.

"I do not know about this Solton character," continued her father, in a hard voice. "Is the gentleman a cad to have broken the hearts of two young ladies, who were entrusted to his care? What does the Earl of Montbatten have to say on the matter?"

Ruth blinked back tears. "Please, Papa, he is not a cad. He did not intend any of it. And the Earl does not know what happened between Patricia and me. He thinks I left so abruptly because of a family crisis.

It was a white lie to protect all of us.”

Her father looked slightly mollified. “Well, if there is no gossip about it, then perhaps all shall be well. There is still a chance for you, Ruth, to redeem yourself. Do not worry, my child. I think you have gotten out of the situation with your reputation intact.”

Ruth turned away, staring into the fire. She had told her parents the truth and all they were worried about was her reputation. They didn’t care that she was heartsore, that she had truly cared for Hugh, or that she mourned the loss of her friendship with Patricia. It was all so black and white for them.

They hadn’t once asked her how she felt about it all. It was just about damage control, ensuring that there was no gossip or scandal, and that her prospects had not been affected by it.

She didn’t know why she felt so disappointed. At least they were rallying around her and had not been *too* angry at her. That was something. And at least she had a clear conscience, knowing that she had not covered up the truth.

She sighed heavily, feeling so weary and heartsore that she didn’t know how she was going to recover. But she must. Hugh was gone from her life now, as quickly as he had entered it. And so was Patricia. Her whirlwind stay at Sandhurst Hall was just a dream. She was back home in Cheapside and her normal, regular life was waiting to be picked up again.

She stood up. “Would you excuse me? I feel I must retire. It has been a very long day.”

She needed to be alone. Only this morning she had been at Sandhurst Hall, singing in the drawing room with Patricia and Hugh. The moment when her friend had discovered their affection. It had all been a nightmare since that moment. The most tumultuous day of her life.

And nothing would ever be the same again.

Ruth sat in the parlour, trying to concentrate on the book in her hand. It was a dull Tuesday afternoon. Her mother was out shopping on Regent Street. She had begged Ruth to go with her, but Ruth had declined. She hadn't been out of the house in over a week now.

She sighed, putting down the book. It was impossible. She wasn't able to concentrate on anything these days. She had tried to play the pianoforte, and embroider, and read. All of the usual things that gave her joy and purpose. None of it worked. She was listless, consumed with misery, unable to stop replaying that appalling last day at Sandhurst Hall over in her mind.

It had been a week since she had left. A week, in which she had waited for a letter from Patricia, her heart in her mouth every time there was mail. But no letter had arrived. It seemed that time had not swayed her former friend's conviction that Ruth had betrayed her and that she wanted nothing more to do with her.

She had been anxious, too, that Hugh *would* write to her. She told herself she didn't want him to. But there had been no letters from him,

either. It seemed he had finally accepted her refusal to have anything more to do with him. It broke her heart but she was glad that he had listened to her at least. That he realised it was all for the best.

She was waiting to feel better about it all. For her broken heart to start mending. But every night when she went to bed, she was consumed by dreams of him. In them, he held her and kissed her, just as he had at Sandhurst Hall and that last time at the inn. She would wake up in tears, desperately trying to hold him to her, and then realise that she was grasping at air.

He was gone. And she must accept it. They must both get on with their lives. But it was easier said than done.

Eventually, her parents arrived home for the evening. At the dinner table, she tried to eat and make normal conversation. But she felt as if she were existing within a bubble that nothing could hope to penetrate. As if she were made of air itself.

After dessert was over, her father cleared his throat, gazing at her.

“You have been moping, Ruth,” he said, frowning slightly. “We understand that you are melancholy after what happened at Sandhurst Hall and have tried to give you space.” He paused. “But it is time to move on. I have a proposition for you. I have already discussed it with your mother and she agrees with me.”

Ruth stared at him, confused. “A proposition? What do you mean?”

Her father picked up his wine glass. “It seems that there is no gossip

surrounding you, which is good. But it was a close call. I think it is better that we get you safely married, rather than letting you gallivant all over London and the countryside.”

Ruth gasped. “Pardon?”

“Your father has a fine gentleman in mind,” interjected her mother, nodding approvingly.

“Indeed,” said her father, smiling. “His name is Mr Cassius Albright. He owns one of the biggest solicitor firms in London. A widower who is looking for a young wife to tend his small children. He has made some very good investments, in iron, and is now quite wealthy. Rich enough to purchase another house in Kent, as well as the one he lives in with his children in London.”

Ruth gaped at them both. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. They were wanting to pawn her off on a widower with small children? A man she had never met before and had never heard of either?

“There is no need for this,” she said, in a tight voice. “I have contained the situation that happened in Essex. There is no threat of scandal or gossip. You do not have to sell me off to the highest bidder.”

“It is not like that, Ruth,” said her father sharply. “Mr Albright is a fine prospect. He is solvent, in fact he is very wealthy. He can provide well for you.” He paused. “On reflection, I think that we were aiming too high, in encouraging you to befriend the beau monde. You do not have to be hand in glove with the nobility or those on the fringes of such society. You were out of your depth and almost lost your reputation as a consequence.”

Ruth put down her wine glass. She was so upset she didn't know what to say. She simply couldn't believe that her parents were doing this.

"I have invited Mr Albright to dinner tomorrow evening," continued her father. "The first step towards matrimony. I think it is for the best, Ruth. You are too young to know your own mind and must be protected..."

"I am *not* too young to know my own mind," she cried. "I realise that I made a mistake. But I am trying to fix it. Can you not just leave me alone and let me recover from it all?"

Her father frowned. "You were very lucky, my girl. Very lucky indeed. That viscount who you defend was merely playing with you, trying to take your virtue. I see now that the nobility are dissolute and we should not put you in their clutches. You are so naïve and it could easily have all gone astray."

She stared at him helplessly. "It was not like that! He was *not* a cad! We had genuine affection for each other..."

"If that is true, why is he not beating down our doorstep?" asked her father. "If he does not know where you live, he could find out easily enough. He is a viscount, after all. But his silence tells us everything there is to know, Ruth. He was dallying with you and probably is breathing a sigh of relief that he escaped so easily from any consequences for his dastardly actions."

"No," said Ruth, shaking her head. "No!"

“Yes,” said her father firmly. “Mr Albright is seeking a wife and a mother for his young children, Ruth. He wishes to secure a wife as soon as possible. You shall encourage him in this regard. That is all I wish to say upon the matter.”

Ruth was dumbfounded. She turned to her mother, gazing at her beseechingly.

“Mama, how can you sanction this?” she whispered. “You wished for me to choose my own husband. I am only seventeen. There is so much time for me to recover from this mistake, and perhaps find someone who I genuinely admire and love...”

Her mother’s face tightened. “There is as much chance of you growing to admire and love this gentleman as any other, Ruth. I am in full agreement with your father. All we are asking you to do is encourage Mr Albright. I think your recent behaviour tells us that we need to tighten the net around you to protect you. You are too immature and innocent and at risk from rakes and cads, my dear.”

Ruth gazed at her, appalled. She had thought that being absolutely truthful with her parents about what had happened at Sandhurst Hall was the right thing to do. But now, it had blown up in her face. They thought that she was at risk of causing gossip and a scandal. That she was so foolish that she was prey to any cad that she encountered.

Her eyes filled with frustrated tears. If she hadn’t discouraged Hugh so vehemently, he could have called or written and assured her parents that he was not a cad who had merely dallied with her. That their affection and admiration for each other had been genuine. But it was all too late for that now.

She thought about writing to him. But quickly, she dismissed the idea. Nothing had changed. Patricia was still angry with her and would not forgive her. And she couldn't afford to encourage Hugh at risk of offending her former friend further and losing any hope that she might forgive her one day.

She stared down at the table. She was trapped, as firmly as if she was enclosed in a tight web. She had little choice, but to entertain this Mr Cassius Albright.

Suddenly, an idea occurred to her. She could write to Patricia, begging her to forgive her again. There wasn't a high chance that her friend would be swayed by a letter, but it was worth a chance.

Apart from the fact she desperately wanted to restore their friendship, it might be the only way that perhaps she could be free again and get her parents to stop pressuring her into marrying any eligible gentleman who they found in their path.

She sat at the desk in her room that night, frowning down on the fresh piece of parchment she had just laid out in front of her. Then she picked up the quill, dipping it into the inkpot. She quickly started writing.

My dearest Patricia,

I pray that this letter finds you well, and that you are quite recovered from your recent illness. I pray also that things are well at Sandhurst Hall and that you are enjoying the remainder of your stay there.

My dearest friend, I am heartsore at the loss of your good opinion. Can you please find it in your heart to forgive me? I realise that I hurt you terribly by encouraging Lord Solton's attentions and not telling you what was between us.

I have no excuse for this, other than the fact that I was compelled. We sincerely admired each other and held a genuine affection. I was swept away by it and then felt like I could not tell you. My fear of hurting you is what made me not say anything. I was hoping that it would pass—that perhaps it was mere infatuation which would diminish. Alas, this was not the case.

I never intended to hurt you. I still do not wish to hurt you. I value your friendship so much. You were kind and generous with me and I can never hope to repay you. I hope and pray that you can find it in your heart to give me a second chance to prove how much I love you.

I remain, your true friend,

Ruth Middleton.

She blotted the letter, then folded it, affixing it with wax. Then she sat back, staring down at it. It held her hopes for the future within it now. Because she knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that her parents would not give up on their current course of action.

If it wasn't Mr Cassius Albright, they would find someone else. They would continue to pressure her to marry someone—anyone—quickly. They no longer cared who it was. They didn't even care if she liked the gentleman or not. They just didn't want gossip or scandal surrounding her. They wanted her off their hands and safely married.

Her eyes filled with tears. She had told them the truth and it had not gone the way she wanted at all. How she wished she could take the words back and they thought she had merely returned home because she missed them, or some such thing. But it was all too late now and she had no idea how it was going to end at all.

Chapter 16

Ruth stared covertly at the gentleman sitting across from her at the dining table. In his late twenties or early thirties, Mr Cassius Albright was a large, florid-faced man, with thin lips and light brown hair. He was sipping his leek and potato soup through pursed lips, frowning slightly.

“I do hope that everything is to your liking, Mr Albright,” said her mother, noticing the way he was staring at his soup.

He glanced up at her. “Oh, indeed, Mrs Middleton.” He paused. “It is just slightly cold, that is all. I am used to it being a tad hotter.”

Her mother raised her eyebrows. “Should I take it back to the kitchen...?”

He shook his head. “No, indeed. I can manage!”

Ruth suppressed a smile. The gentleman had already upset the applecart a few times, since he had walked into the dining room. He had insisted on saying a long and very protracted grace before the meal, which was probably why the soup was slightly cold. And that was after he had been late arriving. Her mother had almost had a conniption, thinking he wasn't coming at all.

But he was here, at last, being feted as if he were royalty. Ruth shuddered delicately. She didn't like the man at all, and the dislike had been instant. She knew that she was looking for things to dislike

about him; that she was not open to Mr Albright being amiable. But it certainly wasn't a hard task.

He looked up from his bowl, staring at her speculatively. Ruth shifted uncomfortably beneath his scrutiny. His eyes were pale blue and cold. She felt as if he were examining her as minutely as he had just examined his soup.

"What a charming young lady you are, Miss Middleton," he said, in a satisfied voice. "Your dear father did not exaggerate."

Ruth sighed. "Thank you, Mr Albright. You are too kind."

He smiled. "You are very young. I hope I do not appear rude, but what is your age, exactly?"

"I am seventeen, sir," she said, through gritted teeth.

His smile widened. "You are a spring chicken, indeed!" He turned to her mother. "That was the age that my dear departed Martha was when we married, madam. I can still see her on our wedding day. She wore a pale blue gown and orange blossom in her hair."

"How charming," said her mother, nodding approvingly. "How long has it been since you lost her?"

"Two years," he said. "She passed away quickly from a fever. Within two days of feeling ill she had gone to her maker." He sighed

dramatically. "It was quite a shock. Martha was an exemplary woman in every way. All who knew her said so. Her loss is a loss for the world."

"I am sure it was," soothed her mother, staring at him sympathetically. "And may I enquire how old your children are, Mr Albright?"

"Clarence is five years old and Eliza is three years," he replied, pulling at his right ear lobe. "Eliza was merely a babe in arms when her mother passed. She does not remember her at all. Clarence, however, misses her keenly and still cries for her from time to time, even though I remind him that his mother is now an angel in heaven and beyond our earthly concerns."

"Poor lamb," said her mother. "Such a hard age to be without his dear mama! And how are you coping, Mr Albright?"

The gentleman sighed. "I manage, Mrs Middleton. I have the services of an exemplary housekeeper and an efficient nanny." He gazed back at Ruth. "But neither of those excellent ladies can take the place of a mother, of course. God willing, I shall find one for my poor children soon."

Ruth smiled at him weakly. She had never spent much time at all with young children and didn't know the first thing about them. And she truly had no desire to become a surrogate for two motherless children. She was sure they were nice children but the mere thought of it filled her with panic.

But it wasn't just that. She wasn't being interviewed to become a nanny or a governess. She would have to marry this man and be his

wife, as well. She shuddered. He left her totally cold. Even if she wasn't comparing him to Hugh, he still would not have appealed to her at all.

She felt her parents eyes upon her. They wanted her to say something encouraging to him. That was what this dinner was about, after all. They had invited this man here so she could charm him and he would propose to her. But she just couldn't do it. She *wouldn't* do it. She was still nursing a broken heart. They didn't care about that at all. All they could think about was marrying her off as quickly as possible.

"I am sure that your dear departed Martha was irreplaceable, Mr Albright," she said quickly. "I think you shall find it hard indeed to find someone who is such a saint as she."

He frowned slightly. "Martha was a saint, indeed, Miss Middleton. The Lord and all his angels in heaven must have welcomed her as if she were one of their own." He paused, his frown deepening. "But she herself would not want to see me alone for the rest of my life, nor her children motherless forever. I would be doing her a disservice in making my life a shrine to her. It would not be what the good Lord wants at all."

Her mother glared at Ruth, before turning to the man. "Of course you should not make your life a shrine to her! That does not help anyone." She paused. "Your poor children do need a mother to love them, Mr Albright. There is nothing like a mother's love."

He nodded, spooning more cold soup into his mouth. They fell silent. When the next course arrived—roast beef with turnips—Mr Albright turned to her determinedly again. Ruth tensed.

“Tell me of your accomplishments, Miss Middleton,” he said. “Your father tells me that you put many grander ladies to shame.”

“I hardly think so,” said Ruth, slicing into her roast beef. “I play the pianoforte, I enjoy reading, I do embroidery. I sometimes draw. Not so very different to any other young lady.”

“Ruth, you are being too modest,” said her mother quickly. “Why, you are a gifted player of the pianoforte and sing like a nightingale as well!” She turned to Mr Albright. “My daughter is also an excellent drawer and painter, sir. That is one of her watercolours above the mantelpiece.”

The man swivelled around in his chair, staring at the painting. Ruth felt like rolling her eyes. It was a modest effort that she had painted when she was fifteen, done when the family had visited the sea at Brighton one day. There was the beach, a wide blue sea and even a cliff with a lighthouse upon it.

Mr Albright squinted at it, pursing his lips. He looked like he was viewing a work of art in an art gallery or museum. Ruth squirmed in her chair, stabbing the roast beef with her fork.

“How charming,” he said eventually, giving her a small smile. “You are quite talented, my dear. Martha was also a dab hand at painting. When she had the time she greatly enjoyed such pursuits.” He paused. “But she did not have a great deal of time after the children were born, of course. A mother’s work is never done.”

“How true,” said her mother, smiling broadly.

“Indeed,” continued the gentleman. “I am sure you would agree, a woman’s greatest role in life is to be a good mother. Nothing else matters. Martha was committed to it and did not pursue anything else once our children came along. I would expect nothing less from any lady who became my second wife.”

Ruth smiled frostily, before staring down at her plate. Her carved up meat looked as if it had been massacred. She truly could not endure this. The man just wanted someone to look after his children for him. That was all. He didn’t see her as a person at all and she knew that if any other lady had been sitting in her place he would be pursuing her just the same.

A drudge, she thought despondently. A thankless drudge, looking after his children. That is all I would be if I married this man.

She felt a pain in her heart. Hugh would never treat her in such a way. If they married, he would treasure her for herself. He would cherish her like gold. Any children would be a part of that love, but not the reason for it.

Her heart shifted again, remembering their shared love of history and music. The way they had sung together. Her life with him would be filled with joy and wonder. If she married the man sitting opposite her, they would probably not even be able to share a conversation. She imagined dull evenings where he lectured to her from the bible, or some such thing. Mr Albright was a pompously pious man. That was obvious already.

She would be a glorified housekeeper, as well as an unpaid nanny. And the thought of being intimate with this man—sharing a bed with him, letting him touch her the way that Hugh had done—filled her with horror.

Was this all she could expect from life?

She had sent the letter to Patricia this morning. Now, all she could do was wait and see if she responded. She wasn't expecting anything, but she couldn't help hoping. Her time at Sandhurst Hall seemed even more like a dream, now. A most wondrous dream, where anything had seemed possible. Where her whole life seemed to stretch ahead of her, filled with promise.

Her eyes filled with helpless tears. She had been so frightened about staying there, believing that she was undeserving of such an honour. But it had truly been the most amazing experience of her life. Everyone at the Hall had been kind to her. The Earl himself, and Lady Clementine. She and Patricia had grown so close—as close as sisters. And then, there had been Hugh...

"I hope that you are not fond of dancing, Miss Middleton," continued Mr Albright, a look of distaste on his face. "My late wife and I believed dance to be the devil's work, and young ladies who are overfond of it akin to jezebels. I cannot abide such frivolity and sensuous pursuits, where the flesh is valued over the spirit."

Ruth dropped her fork. It clattered onto her plate. There was a strained silence in the room. How on earth was she supposed to respond to that comment, in a way that would please her parents?

She took a deep breath. She *couldn't* please her parents, without displeasing herself. They wanted to marry her off quickly and were not fussed about the gentleman who did the honours. But she didn't have to go along with it. She could actively resist. She could stave off their plans for as long as possible. She had always been a dutiful and

obedient daughter but this was her whole *life* they were playing with.

She took another deep breath, staring straight at the gentleman. "I am afraid that I greatly enjoy dancing, Mr Albright. In fact, it is one of my very favourite activities in the world." She smiled archly. "I find such sensuality very liberating. I would never be able to give it up. I suppose if that makes me a jezebel, then so be it."

There was a shocked intake of breath around the table. Mr Albright glared at her as if the whore of Babylon had just landed in their midst. Her mother had turned sickly pale and her father looked so thunderous it was a wonder he didn't have an apoplexy.

Ruth stood up, throwing her napkin on the table. "I do apologise, but I find I have a headache coming on. Please excuse me."

She didn't wait for anyone to speak. She simply turned upon her heel, marching out of the room, closing the door firmly behind her.

She noticed her hands were trembling as she ran up the staircase to her chambers. In her room, she fell across the bed, taking short, sharp gasps of breath into her lungs.

She knew that she should feel bad for what she had done. She had been defiant, painfully rude and discourteous of their guest. But the strange truth was she simply did not care. She did not care if her parents gave her the tongue lashing of her life for what she had said to the man and for then shockingly leaving the room.

She took a deep, ragged breath. She could never encourage a

gentleman like Mr Cassius Albright. She could never marry a man like that. It would be akin to being buried alive.

Ruth gazed up at the ceiling despondently. There would be hell to pay for what she had done. But the simple truth was she could resist her parents new plans for her. Any gentleman they brought before her as a potential suitor could be discouraged. No gentleman worth his salt would dream of proposing to a disagreeable, shrewish woman.

Suddenly, she sat bolt upright on the bed. Unless they simply married her off without even asking her permission.

Her blood ran cold at the mere thought. She simply couldn't believe her parents would do such a thing to her. Could they?

Ruth had been expecting the call to go downstairs again, as soon as Mr Albright left the house, but it arrived sooner than she anticipated. Her parents were waiting for her in the parlour. They were stiff backed and sour faced.

"What was the meaning of that intemperate display at the dinner table?" asked her father, in a deceptively calm voice.

Ruth exhaled slowly. "I apologise, Papa. I simply had a headache coming on, as I said." She hesitated, before ploughing on. "And all I did was truthfully answer Mr Albright's question. He asked me if I liked to dance and I told him that I did."

“Ruth,” said her mother, wringing her hands. “What has gotten into you? I have never seen you act in such a manner to a guest, let alone a gentleman who may become your suitor! You were deliberately provocative. I do not understand at all!”

Ruth glared at her. “What is there to understand, Mama? You both wished me to charm Mr Albright but I found him disagreeable. I do not wish to encourage him as a suitor. It would be a slow death married to such a gentleman. I would not be able to even breathe.”

“Ruth,” admonished her father. “That is not a ladylike way to speak at all! Mr Albright is a fine, upstanding gentleman. A pillar of the community. You would be very lucky to secure a husband such as him, my girl.”

Ruth’s heart was beating violently. It made her sick to her stomach to have a confrontation like this with her parents. She had never done so in her life. But she knew instinctively that if she did not assert herself now, her parents would ride roughshod over her life, forcing her to do something she didn’t want to do. They would force her to be someone she didn’t want to be.

But being at loggerheads with them over the issue wasn’t the right course of action, either. She needed to be smart about this. And she needed to be calm.

“I am mindful that you are only trying to do the best for me,” she said carefully, changing tack. “I appreciate it. I know you think that I need a husband straight away and that I am too innocent to secure a good gentleman for myself...”

Her father shook his head angrily. "That incident at Sandhurst Hall proved it, Ruth. We were foolish to have ever allowed you to go. To think what the consequences might have been!"

Ruth nodded, trying hard to suppress her anger. "Yes. But could I beg that you allow me one more chance, to secure a husband that I find agreeable by myself? To go out into society and make my own choice?"

Her father stared at her warily. "What exactly are you asking?"

"To have my own choice on the matter," she said quickly. "I am not saying I do not wish to secure a husband quickly. Just that the gentleman be my own choice, someone I find agreeable, and not someone you both have chosen. Otherwise, I cannot comply, Papa."

His eyes narrowed. "You promise faithfully that you would encourage a proper gentleman? That this is not a ruse to get out of our plans for you?"

Ruth took a deep breath. "I promise."

There was silence in the room. Her mother looked uncertain, biting her lip. Her father was frowning, as if in deep contemplation. Ruth held her breath, waiting for the reply.

"One month," he barked eventually. "I give you one month to find a suitable gentleman of your own choice. But if at the end of that month you have no suitor, then we shall revert back to finding one ourselves

for you. Do you agree?”

Ruth’s heart lurched. “I agree.”

Her father gave a painful sigh. “Your mother shall accompany you everywhere and watch you like a hawk, Ruth. We do not want a repeat of what just happened. You will be supervised closely and she will tell me if you are merely dallying with us, not intent upon the task. Do you understand?”

Ruth nodded. “I understand the terms.”

Her father sighed again. “Very well. I give my permission. But I shall not back down on the timeframe, nor the consequences if you do not find a suitor in that time. Think very carefully how you shall approach this task, my girl. Do not play games with me.”

“Yes, Papa,” she whispered, hanging her head. Her mind was awlirl.

One month. He had given her one month to find a suitable suitor. It wasn’t much, but it bought her a little time. It appeased her parents and made it look as if she was being compliant. More importantly, it stopped them bringing gentlemen like Cassius Albright to the house and forcing her to entertain them.

She took a deep breath, thinking quickly. It seemed the only course of action she could take. If she had kept being defiant she was frightened they would simply take the matter out of her hands and arrange a marriage for her.

It wasn't ideal. However, it was the best that she could hope to do for the moment. Once again, she cursed the fact that she had told them the truth of what had happened at Sandhurst Hall. But it was too late to change it all now.

That night when she finally crawled into bed, her mind was still awl. She stared at the wall, feeling hopeless.

At least, she had asserted herself and bought some time. If she had passively gone along with her parents, then Mr Albright might be planning to make another call upon her tomorrow. At least this way she had staved off such a dreadful outcome. It wasn't much but it was something.

She took a deep breath. Tomorrow she must enter the world again. She had been like an animal licking its wounds since she had returned from Sandhurst Hall, hiding herself away at home. But tomorrow she must make plans to go out, to find balls and afternoon tea parties and other social events with a view to finding a proper suitor. Someone who would appease her parents and make it look as if she were complying with them.

Her heart squeezed tight. She didn't want to. Her mind and heart were still filled with Hugh. He was the only man she could see, the only man who made her heart sing, the only man who made the blood quicken in her veins. The thought of encouraging another made her feel ill. But she must do it.

A single tear trickled down her cheek. If only she had been able to encourage him; to tell him that she wanted him to call upon her and become a proper suitor. He had told her that was what he wanted to do. But Patricia made it impossible. Ruth couldn't encourage Hugh without doing further damage to her friend.

If only Patricia had not decided so vehemently that Hugh was her target. And the awful irony of it was that Ruth knew her friend did not truly admire or love him. She also knew that Patricia's efforts were wasted. Hugh would never consider her.

Ruth's heart twisted. She was being forced to discourage the man she truly wanted for nothing. It was a tragedy for all of them. If only Patricia could realise that. But her friend was set upon her own trajectory and there was nothing to be done about it at all.

Chapter 17

Hugh marched into his father's study. The Earl was seated, as always, behind his desk in a state of organised chaos, a mountain of papers surrounding him. His father looked befuddled, putting down his quill.

"Hugh," he said. "What can I do for you, my boy?"

Hugh sat down, interlacing his hands. He didn't quite know what his father could do for him. He didn't quite know why he was here at all. He only knew it was imperative that he clarify a few things with his father that were playing on his mind. But how to approach the subject was a bit beyond him.

He cleared his throat. "Father, I need to talk to you about marriage."

His father raised an eyebrow. "Truly? Are you trying to tell me that you have a lady in mind at long last? I thought I would never see the day!" He blinked rapidly. "It is not Miss Patricia Poldark, is it? I have noticed her particular regard for you. She is always seeking you out. You could do a lot worse, my boy. And she is only a distant relative, after all."

Hugh felt embarrassed. "No, Father. I have no admiration for Miss Poldark in that way, regardless of any feelings she may have for me." He hesitated. "I simply wished to clarify that I am free to marry any lady that I so choose. That there are no conditions that you have placed upon it, regarding me inheriting the earldom and the estate."

His father frowned. "Well, the lady must be of exemplary character and background, of course. We cannot have just anyone become Countess of Montbatten, can we? I would have to do a thorough background check and make sure she is the right candidate for the job. It is not just about love, my boy. You are not the local blacksmith."

Hugh's face tightened. "What if the candidate is of exemplary character, but has obscure connections and no wealth?"

His father smiled wryly. "An impoverished lady? Well, as long as her background check does not turn up anything murky, then we could consider it. No skeletons in the closet, and that sort of thing." He paused, staring at Hugh carefully. "You *do* have someone in mind, then?"

Hugh exhaled slowly. He wasn't at all sure he should tell his father about Ruth, but he was growing desperate. He needed to at least know that the Earl gave his blessings to pursue her—that the older man would not discourage him or place any impediments in his path.

How he was going to achieve it beyond that he still wasn't sure. Ruth had discouraged him completely and Patricia Poldark was not budging an inch on the matter. But being here was a start and made him feel as if he was achieving something in the general direction.

"Yes, I do," he said, taking a deep breath. "I am considering Miss Ruth Middleton."

His father's face dropped. "You are teasing me, surely? No, Hugh. She is not suitable at all."

Hugh felt a flash of anger. "Just because she is the daughter of a solicitor? You surprise me, Father. You liked her very much when she was staying here. She is an accomplished lady and would make a fine countess. Are you truly so much of a purist in this regard?"

The Earl looked pained. "I *did* like Miss Middleton very much," he said slowly. "And I am not so much of a purist in that way. My belief has always been that I shall be open minded to any lady who you choose." He frowned. "But some disturbing things have come to light regarding Miss Middleton, since she so abruptly left us. The true reason she left as opposed to what she told us."

Hugh's blood ran cold. "What are you talking about?"

The Earl sighed heavily. "Miss Poldark told me one evening over dinner, when you were not here. The lady claims that the true reason Miss Middleton left was because she had been caught taking small items from Miss Poldark's wardrobe without her knowledge. That she is basically a thief."

Hugh was so stunned he couldn't reply for a moment. He gaped at his father. He simply could not believe that Patricia Poldark had sunk to this.

"Miss Poldark was tearful," continued the Earl, his frown deepening. "She said she extended the hand of friendship to Miss Middleton and that she was deceived as to her true character." His voice was grim.

He paused. "She agreed to leave Sandhurst Hall when Miss Poldark confronted her. She said that Miss Middleton was always jealous of

her and coveting her possessions. Miss Poldark tried to be kind—even lending an expensive gown to Miss Middleton to wear to that ball we all attended—but it was all thrown back in her face.”

“She is lying,” said Hugh, in a furious voice. “Miss Middleton did no such thing, Father! She is not a thief!” He paused, trying to control his rage. “The true story is that Miss Poldark thought I was partial to her and was hoping to win me over, but when she discovered my regard for Miss Middleton, she flew into a rage and basically told her to leave. It was purely sour grapes on her behalf.”

His father looked surprised. “You are telling me that Miss Poldark is a liar? That she lied to my face about her friend?” He shook his head. “Miss Poldark is a relative of ours, Hugh. She comes from an exemplary family. I am afraid that I believe her over her former friend, whose character and background we truly know nothing about, and leaves a lot to be desired.”

Hugh gazed at him steadily. This was appalling. He had thought that Miss Poldark was simply being stubborn in refusing to forgive Ruth for her supposed transgression against her. But now he saw that she was being vindictive, as well. She had threatened to blacken Ruth’s name when he had confronted her that day but he hadn’t really believed she would sink to such lows.

It seemed he had been wrong.

“I am afraid that your regard for Miss Middleton is misplaced,” continued his father sadly. “We were all deceived in her character. There is simply no way I could sanction you seriously courting her with a view to matrimony, Hugh. The next Countess of Montbatten must be above reproach. You understand that, do you not?”

“She is above reproach,” insisted Hugh, tightening his fists. “And I shall prove it to you, one way or the other.”

His father sighed heavily. “I rather think you should set your sights on another lady, my boy. The damage has been done. How could we ever trust that there is no truth to it? You see my dilemma. Where there is smoke there is fire, I am afraid.”

Hugh stood up quickly. He couldn’t sit here and listen to this for a second longer. It was all he could do not to slam his fist onto the desk in front of him.

“I *shall* prove it to you,” he repeated. “I do not know how yet, but I vow it.”

He stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him. Miss Poldark and her aunt were out walking the estate. But he knew that they would be returning soon. And when they did, he was going to confront her. This appalling state of affairs had to stop, before any more damage was done.

He saw her in the distance, walking towards the house, with Lady Clementine trailing behind her. He stood and waited for her. She smiled widely as she approached him.

“My Lord,” she said wryly. “You are waiting for me. How romantic.”

He glared at her. "There is nothing romantic about it, Miss Poldark. I am here because I have just heard about some scurrilous lies you have told."

She raised an eyebrow. "I assume you are talking about Miss Middleton?"

"I am," he said, taking an angry breath. "You told my father that she is a thief and that is the reason she left Sandhurst Hall so abruptly. You must go into him right this minute and tell him that it is *you* who is the liar."

Patricia gave a bark of laughter. "I shall do no such thing! Ruth deserves it. And she *is* a thief. She stole my chance with you, did she not? It is the same thing, only under a different guise."

He kept glaring at her. "You are a very sore loser, are you not, Miss Poldark? Why can you just not accept that I have no interest in you? Why must you make it a rivalry between you both?"

Her face dropped. "Because I have lost everything, Lord Solton. All my hopes and dreams. Why should poor Ruth Middleton get everything that *she* wants in life? She is a nobody! I befriended her, tried to improve her chances in life, and she dared to try to rise higher than me. I cannot let that happen."

"So you would blacken the name of an innocent girl?" he whispered furiously. "A girl who was loyal and true to you and whose only transgression against you was achieving what you had set out to do, even though she had no intention of doing it?"

“You know nothing about me, My Lord,” said Patricia, in a grim voice. “You know nothing about my life, nor what disappointments I have suffered! And believe me, if you *did* know, you would not stand before me so arrogantly claiming that this is all about you!”

He gaped at her, mystified. The comment was so cryptic he could not make head nor tail of it. If all of this *wasn't* about him, then what was it about? He didn't understand her at all.

“Please,” he said, in a low voice. “Just go and tell the Earl that you were mistaken, at least. You do not have to say you were lying. Just that you thought her a thief but have since discovered you were mistaken. An honest mistake. Say that your maid misplaced your items or some such thing.”

“No,” said Patricia, staring at him defiantly. “I shall do no such thing.” She took a deep breath. “Besides anything else, I have no time for it. My aunt and I have decided to return to London this afternoon. The carriage is already being prepared and our trunks packed. This extended house stay has gone on for quite long enough, My Lord.”

He swore underneath his breath. Had she just decided to leave in that moment, because she was feeling under pressure? Because she wanted to skulk away with her tail between her legs? It wouldn't surprise him in the least.

He gazed at her in disgust. He wouldn't waste any more of his breath upon her. And he was glad that she was going at long last. It had been a strain, in more ways than one, to make polite conversation with her over the dinner table since Ruth had left, over a week ago.

He turned on his heel, marching stiffly back into the house and straight to his study. He was at an absolute loss to know how to repair this situation. It had only gotten worse now. He poured himself a restorative brandy, downing it in one go, before pouring himself another.

He had hoped that his father would give his tacit approval to pursuing Ruth. But all that had gone out the window now. His mild mannered father had dug his heels in because he believed Ruth was a liar and a thief. And it was all Patricia Poldark's doing.

A calculated move on her part to discredit her former friend and make very sure that Ruth was never in contention to become the next Countess of Montbatten.

He laughed mirthlessly to himself. The irony of it all was that Patricia Poldark hadn't had to do it. Ruth wasn't even considering him anymore, had told him to leave her alone, because she was still trying to be the loyal friend to Patricia that she was. While Patricia had decided to stab her in the back completely, blacken her name, just so her former friend couldn't win. It was detestable.

He sipped the brandy, trying to control his rage. Even if Patricia hadn't lied to his father about Ruth, and the Earl had given his approval, it was still remote that Ruth would have considered him.

She wouldn't have done it because Patricia was still furious with her. That was what it was all about for her. He probably couldn't have persuaded her to consider him even if he told her they had his father's blessings.

He ran a hand through his hair in despair, trying desperately to think of a way to salvage the situation. But for the life of him, he couldn't think of anything. Ruth refused to see him.

Patricia was not only obstinate on the matter but malicious, spreading lies about Ruth. His father believed Patricia and thought Ruth unworthy of consideration at all. And there was nothing he could do to change any of it. He had never felt so hopeless in his life.

Ruth took a deep breath, fanning herself vigorously, as she walked into the assembly room with her mother. She felt rather like an overdressed doll, or a marionette, whose strings were being pulled behind a curtain somewhere. She didn't feel like herself at all.

She took a deep breath, taking a glass of champagne from a passing footman. She didn't want to be here—she wanted to be safely at home, away from the crowd of bright-eyed ladies and gentlemen milling around the room. She had never felt at home in these places but she felt even more of an intruder now.

She took another deep breath. An intruder with a mission. She was being forced to pretend to be the fortune hunter she had never wanted to be.

Her mother gripped her arm tightly. "Now remember, Ruth, that you must not refuse any offer to dance from a suitable gentleman. If a known cad approaches you, I shall intercede on your behalf. But otherwise, you are not to be fussy. Do you understand?"

“Yes, Mama,” she replied, feeling as if steam rather than breath was coming out of her nostrils. “I understand what I must do.”

“Good,” said her mother, patting her arm. “You shall think it all well worth it, after you have secured a proposal.”

They slowly drifted around the room, arm in arm. Normally, her mother would have left her to mingle with another group of young ladies, content to observe proceedings from a distance, preferably sitting down with a cup of tea and a cream cake in hand. But not now. Her father had been specific in his instructions. Ruth must be supervised at all times and her potential suitors carefully screened. They must not risk another possible scandal.

Ruth had never felt more suffocated in her life. How she longed for Sandhurst Hall and the freedom she had experienced there.

Firmly, she pushed away the desire. It did no good to long for something which was gone. She couldn't believe that she had been yearning to get back to London now, before Patricia had realised what was between she and Hugh. But then, she hadn't realised how her parents would overreact, when she told them the truth of what had happened, had she?

At least she had pushed back the threat of Mr Albright and his ilk. For now. But the threat of an arranged marriage with a gentleman she did not want hovered at the back of her mind.

“Smile,” entreated her mother suddenly, digging her elbow into Ruth's ribs. “A young gentleman is approaching, Ruth. I believe we have

been introduced to him before. It is Mr Ormond, is it not?"

Ruth nodded, plastering a smile onto her face. The gentleman's name was indeed Mr Ormond. Mr Jerome Ormond. Ruth remembered he was the youngest son of a well to do, if staid, middleclass family. She had never given him a second look and she didn't believe he had ever looked at her before, now.

All she had to do was dance with him, if that was what he wanted. He would not be proposing marriage to her today. She could do that, couldn't she?

Mr Ormond was in his early twenties. He was slightly plump, with a glowing face and long, sandy sideburns. His eyes were small and a bit shifty, looking like small blue baubles. He bowed. Ruth and her mother curtsied.

"Miss Middleton," he said airily. "Mrs Middleton."

"Mr Ormond," said her mother, smiling brightly. "What a fine turnout today!"

"Indeed," he said curtly. "Most fine." He turned to Ruth. "Would you care to dance, Miss Middleton?"

Ruth nodded, holding out her hand. "I would like that very much, Mr Ormond."

He swept her away, onto the dance floor. A quadrille was in progress. They bowed to one another. Ruth went through the motions of the dance, feeling as if her smile was frozen upon her face. The gentleman was stiff and not a very good dancer at all. She couldn't stop recalling the night of the ball in Essex, when she had been so nervous she had bumped into Hugh.

Her heart lurched. It seemed like an age ago now. She still hadn't known how she felt about him back then. And he had been so very careful around her. The spark of attraction was there between them but they still hadn't admitted it to one another. And not even to themselves.

Her eyes filled with tears. They had fought so hard to resist what was between them. They had both known that everything was against them. And that had even been before Patricia had decided, so inexplicably, to set her sights upon him. It had started that night, after Ruth had left the ball. What had changed that night, to make her so determined? Ruth didn't know. She hadn't been there.

Suddenly, she remembered the gentleman who had approached her that night—the one who had recognised Patricia's gown and quite rudely informed her that he was aware she was wearing it.

He had claimed that he knew Patricia. Ruth frowned. She didn't know why he had suddenly reared up in her mind, or what significance it had. It probably had none at all. And yet, it lingered in her mind, making her feel uneasy.

"Miss Middleton?" The dance had ended, and Mr Ormond was staring at her. "Would you like some refreshment?"

Ruth took a deep breath. “Yes, that would be very nice.”

He escorted her from the dance floor. Ruth saw her mother watching her movements like a hawk. She smiled faintly. Mama didn’t need to be so vigilant. She had no intention of letting the bland as blancmange Mr Ormond spirit her away to a private alcove. The thought of him trying to kiss her gave her the cold shivers. She was in no danger of losing her reputation at his hands.

The gentleman took two glasses of champagne from a passing footman, handing one to her. He raised it in the air, staring straight at her. “To you, Miss Middleton. You are the loveliest lady in attendance this evening, if I may be so bold.”

She sipped her champagne. “You are too kind, Mr Ormond. I rather think you are exaggerating.”

“Not at all,” he insisted, his blue bauble like eyes glittering. “You look rather different to what you usually do. Pardon my candour, but usually you are very timid. You have a different air about you this evening. As if you have found your confidence. You are glowing, Miss Middleton.”

Ruth took another sip of her champagne, to hide her surprise at his words. He was probably just flattering her. But then, quite suddenly, she noticed that other gentlemen were staring covertly at her, in a way they never normally did. Was there a grain of truth in what Mr Ormond had just told her?

She smiled wryly. The truth was, she *did* feel more confident in herself. Usually she would have been a bundle of nerves at such an assembly, feeling herself unworthy. Just like she had been on the

night of that ball in Essex. But something had changed within her now. Something that she was only just beginning to put her finger upon.

Her heart flipped over in her chest. It was because of Hugh. He had brought her out of herself, given her confidence. He had made her see things within herself that she had never seen before. As devastated as she was about what had happened between them, that glow he had given her had obviously not faded. This gentleman could see it still. As could others in the room.

Her eyes filled with tears again. The irony of it all was not lost upon her. It was Hugh's admiration and affection for her which was now attracting other men to her. Perhaps finding a suitable suitor wasn't going to be as hard as she had thought it would be. Maybe she would be spoiled for choice. Even though she wanted none of them.

Her father was waiting up for them when Ruth and her mother returned home after the assembly. Ruth was unbearably weary after smiling and preening and dancing the night away. But she knew she would not be able to finally go to bed until they had spoken.

"Well?" he asked, leading them into the parlour. "Did you find a suitor, Ruth?"

She sighed. "I danced with many gentlemen, Papa. And there were one or two who seemed inclined to call upon me."

Her mother nodded encouragingly. "Mr Ormond seemed very taken with you, Ruth. And Mr Stanley asked you to dance twice." She turned to her husband. "Ruth did very well, my dear. And I kept a very close eye upon her, as we agreed."

Ruth felt a sudden pang of irritation. They were talking about her as if she were a child. A recalcitrant child who could not be trusted to behave. It was maddening. But she must go along with it. There was simply nothing she could do.

He nodded with satisfaction. "A successful evening, then. I am glad." He paused, staring at Ruth carefully. "I have a surprise for you as well, Ruth. I spoke with Mr Albright today, and much to my shock, he is still inclined to call upon you."

Ruth gazed at him in dismay. "I beg your pardon?"

Her father smiled. "Yes, it is inexplicable, is it not? It seems that your provocative comment about dancing has not discouraged him. In fact, he said you are a very charming young lady."

Ruth shook her head disbelievingly. "I have already said that I have no interest in Mr Albright, Papa. We agreed that I could find a suitable suitor who I do find agreeable. That is the reason I went out this evening..."

"I know that, Ruth," he interjected, waving a hand dismissively in the air. "You may still continue on that course of action. But we should not discourage Mr Albright, either, if he is still eager. We should not put all of our eggs into one basket, should we?"

Ruth bit her lip. "I am very tired. May I retire?"

"Of course, my dear," said her father magnanimously. "As you wish."

She was just about to turn to the door, when she stopped. "No letters have arrived for me?"

Her father shook his head. "I am afraid not, Ruth. Were you expecting one?"

Ruth sighed. "It is of no matter. Good night."

She climbed the stairs to her room. Patricia would have received her letter by now but had still not responded. Her heart sank. It seemed that her former friend had not had a change of heart. Ruth's appeal for forgiveness had been rebuffed again.

She should have expected it. But a wave of pure disappointment and sorrow swept over her. She had lost a friend and her chance at love as well. She had never felt more desolate in her life.

Chapter 18

Ruth sat in the parlour, sipping a cup of tea. Her mother was sitting opposite her. Beside her was Mr Cassius Albright. He was gazing at Ruth avidly, barely touching his own cup of tea, which he had rested on a side table.

Ruth had been shocked when her mother had announced the gentleman's unexpected call. Even though her father had told her three nights ago that Mr Albright was still interested in her, she hadn't really believed it. But now, here he was. She hadn't had any choice but to receive him. Her strategy to choose a suitor of her own, to get her parents off her back, seemed to be failing dismally.

"Perhaps you would care to play a tune on the pianoforte, Miss Middleton?" asked the gentleman warmly. "Your mother waxed lyrical about your talents and I am most eager to hear your accomplishments on the instrument."

Ruth suppressed her irritation. She felt like a performing monkey. But they were both staring at her expectantly. She sighed, putting down her teacup, before taking her place at the instrument. She riffled through the sheet music on the stand, choosing one, before raising her fingers above the keys.

A vivid memory suddenly assaulted her. Playing the instrument at Sandhurst Hall, with Hugh and Patricia standing on either side of the pianoforte as they all sung together. Her eyes filled with tears, as she remembered the last song they had sung that day. *Lavender's Blue*. The song that had revealed to Patricia what was between them and caused everything to unfurl.

It had been two weeks now, since she had left Sandhurst Hall. Two weeks in which she was still trying to deal with the ramifications of that day. She wished fervently she could let it all go and move on. But no matter how much she tried to do that it was still as fresh in her mind as if it had all happened yesterday.

Her hands struck the keys. She played automatically, her mind quite separate from what she was doing with her hands. This was unusual. Normally, she was engrossed in the music and fully engaged with what she was doing; she would become swept away within it. But today it was as if the music was as flat and dead as her heart was.

She finished, resting her hands upon her lap. There was polite clapping from her audience of two. She glanced up. Her mother was staring at her, in a puzzled way. But Mr Albright was clapping enthusiastically. Ruth knew he had nothing to compare her current performance to. She was proficient enough on the instrument that she could still play well and he would not know the difference.

“Bravo, Miss Middleton,” he said, his eyes shining. “You are a skilled player indeed!”

She smiled faintly. “Thank you, Mr Albright. You are too kind.”

Her mother looked pained. Ruth waited for her to contradict the gentleman, but she was silent. Ruth felt another wave of irritation roll over her. It was all so ridiculous. She had already made her feelings about Mr Albright clear to her parents. And now, they were expecting her to completely sweep them under the carpet yet again. It was maddening in the extreme.

There was a knock on the parlour door. Their maid walked in, carrying something in her hand.

“Pardon the intrusion,” she said, gazing at Ruth. “A letter has just arrived for you, miss.” She passed the letter to Ruth.

Ruth stood up, gripping the letter. Her hand was shaking. She recognised Patricia’s handwriting on the front of it. A letter had arrived from her friend at long last. Her heart lurched. She wanted to rip it open and feverishly read it right now. But she couldn’t.

Quickly, she put the letter into her pocket, smiling at the maid. “Thank you.”

She turned back to her mother and Mr Albright, who were both staring at her.

“A letter, Miss Middleton,” said the gentleman. “I hope it is good news.”

“Indeed,” said Ruth, her heart fluttering. “Let us finish our tea before it grows cold, Mr Albright. I shall pour you another one.”

It wasn’t until an hour later that Ruth was able to finally lock herself in her room with the letter. Mr Albright had lingered over tea, asking her painful questions about her life. Ruth had tried to be polite but

could barely contain her impatience.

At last she was alone. With a trembling hand, she took out the letter from her pocket, breaking the red wax seal. She sank down onto the side of her bed, reading quickly.

My dearest Ruth,

I know you shall be shocked by what I am about to tell you. You perhaps shall even be angry with me. I accept this, because I have not been honest with you. Not in the least. And I have caused you pain and misery that perhaps can never be fixed.

I received your heartfelt letter just before I left Sandhurst Hall. At that stage, I was still so confused and miserable that I could not respond. I felt as if my life was over and that there was never any joy for me again in this life. I am sorry to say that I lashed out at you, and made you a scapegoat for that misery. Let me explain.

I never told you that the reason I was so eager to leave London and stay at Sandhurst Hall was because of a love affair. I had fallen deeply in love with a gentleman over the course of the London season. But we could not openly court because his family and my own are not friendly.

In fact, one could say they are enemies. We tried to deny our love but it kept growing. In desperation, I decided to quit London entirely, to give us space. I hoped that perhaps our feelings would fade away.

I thought perhaps it was working, but then I saw him on the night of the ball in Essex. He had travelled there in the hope of seeing me, imploring me

that he could not forget me and that he loved me as much as ever. My own feelings were just the same towards him, but I was still trying to do the right thing. I spurned him, telling him to leave me alone forever. He agreed eventually. It was a terrible parting.

The next day, I was so miserable that I decided to try to put him behind me forever by chasing a more suitable gentleman, one that I knew my family would approve of. You know who that gentleman was.

I only chose Lord Solton because he was the nearest gentleman at hand, who I thought I could convince to fall in love with me and marry me. I was mad with grief and not thinking clearly. All I wanted was to try to leave my lost love behind forever.

Unfortunately, it all went desperately wrong. I took it all out on you when I discerned the feelings between you both. All I could focus upon was the fact that everything I attempted seemed to fail.

I just wanted a quick marriage of convenience, but even that was denied me. I lashed out at you. I am heartily ashamed of myself now. None of it was ever your fault and I hold no ill will against you for falling in love with Lord Solton.

It all came to a head, just before I left Sandhurst Hall. Lord Solton appealed to me again. I was so bitter and miserable I refused him. I knew I had to leave, for fear I would do something else I was ashamed of. I had become a stranger to myself. To say that I despised myself is an understatement indeed.

Back in London, I sent word to my lover, whose name is Jack Carruthers. I finally decided that I did not care any longer about the rift between our families. I would rather be with the one I love, poor and estranged from my

family, than end up a bitter, lonely old woman, hurting everyone I loved along the way.

Ruth, we have eloped. We have told no one in our families. By the time this letter reaches you, we shall be far away. The only reason I am telling you is that you deserve to know all this. I have treated you appallingly. My only excuse is my misery. I was in so much pain and could not see beyond it.

I beg your forgiveness, my dear friend. I know how loyal you are, how tenderly you cared for me when I was ill, and how much you love me. I love you the same way. I do not know if we shall ever see each other again. But I wish you all the best in the world, and there is nothing to forgive on my part. You never did me wrong. I hope that you are able to find your own love now. I know that he is waiting for you.

Your loving friend,

Patricia.

The letter fell from Ruth's hand. She was so shocked she could barely think. She hadn't known what to expect from the letter but it had not been this. It was as far from what she had expected that it was like it had been written by another person entirely. As if it had not been written by Patricia at all.

Everything made sense now.

Her lover's name is Jack Carruthers.

It was the gentleman who had approached her at the ball in Essex. She remembered his name. The one who had recognised that she was wearing Patricia's gown. He had been at that ball to see Patricia. He had sought her out to declare his love for her again. And Patricia had spurned him that night. The very next day, she had abruptly decided to focus on Hugh, in a desperate effort to forget about the man she loved.

Her eyes filled with hopeless tears. She and Hugh had been caught in the crossfire, that was all. Patricia had been so determined that she would become Hugh's wife not because she was a fortune hunter, or desired him, but simply because he was the closest gentleman at hand. It had just been a way of coping with her pain. And then when it appeared she had been thwarted, she lashed out in anger. Ruth had become the scapegoat.

Ruth gave a tremulous sigh. She should be angry at Patricia. She should be very angry indeed. But she wasn't angry at all. She just felt desperately sorry for her friend. Patricia hadn't meant to hurt anybody, although she had. And now, she was extending the hand of friendship again, asking for forgiveness.

She picked up the letter again. The tears were falling down her cheeks, now. They dripped onto the paper, smudging the ink. Ruth didn't care. She had already practically memorised it. And even if she hadn't, she was still free. The awful weight that had been sitting in her chest like a stone had finally lifted.

Patricia no longer despised her. She had told her that she had *never* had the right to despise her. Her friend wished her well.

She sobbed into her hands, as the full burden unravelled. Patricia had

acted wrongly and without thought about how her words and actions would affect those around her. But she was trying to repair the damage through this letter.

It was enough. It was more than enough.

There was a soft knock on the door. Ruth hastily wiped away her tears, folding the letter quickly and stuffing it underneath her pillow.

“Come in,” she called, standing up.

Her mother entered. She had a strange look on her face.

“Ruth,” she said slowly. “You have a visitor. He is waiting for you in the parlour.”

Ruth gaped at her mother. “Who is it?”

Her mother bit her lip. “A gentleman. He gives his name as Lord Solton. The Viscount Dalrymple.”

Hugh was standing in the parlour, leaning against the mantelpiece. He turned around quickly when he heard Ruth enter, with her mother trailing behind her. She watched his face transform.

Her heart was fluttering in her chest, so violently, that it felt like a small bird desperately trying to escape its cage. Even though she knew he was here, it was still a shock to see him. How tall he was. How handsome. She felt a rush of love hit her like a tidal wave.

She had thought that she would never see him again in her life.

“Miss Middleton,” he said, in a formal tone. “How good it is to see you. You look very well.”

She couldn’t speak. She just nodded.

He stepped forward. “I hope you do not mind that I have called upon you without prior warning. But time is of the essence.” He took a deep breath. “I am afraid that Miss Patricia Poldark has gone missing. She returned to London at the beginning of the week. But yesterday she did not return from a shopping expedition. Her family have enlisted me in the search for her. I came here in the hope that she has perhaps been in contact with you.”

Ruth gaped at him. She hadn’t expected at all that he was here for this reason. But of course, it made sense. Patricia had admitted she had eloped. Her family *would* be searching for her.

Her mother was staring at him. There was a tense silence for a moment.

“Yes,” she said breathlessly. “I just received a letter from Patricia.” She hesitated. Would she be betraying her friend’s confidence, in telling him? But she had to do it. “She informed me within it that she has eloped.”

Her mother drew a sharp breath of shock. “Oh, my dear Lord. How shocking.”

Hugh didn’t take his eyes off her. “Did she inform you who she had eloped with and where they had gone?”

“I do not know where they have gone,” said Ruth, in a tremulous voice. “But I do know the name of the gentleman. It is Jack Carruthers.”

Hugh went pale. “Are you sure? Jack Carruthers?”

Ruth nodded, feeling scared. “Yes, I am sure. The same gentleman who I met at the ball in your district, Lord Solton.”

Hugh looked grim. “I fear that there is no marriage, Miss Middleton. Nor shall there be.” He took a deep breath. “Jack Carruthers is a cad. I know him from years ago and he has never changed. Are you sure you do not know where they have gone?”

Ruth felt all the blood drain from her face. She had been so happy for her friend, thinking that she had found happiness at long last. But now, it seemed that it was far more complicated than she had ever imagined.

Chapter 19

Ruth's heart was beating fast. She remembered now that one reason Hugh had spirited her away at that ball was because of the gentleman's reputation as a cad. The gentleman named Jack Carruthers, who Patricia had run away with, claiming they were to be married. But Hugh was saying he didn't believe that they would be.

Had Patricia finally found the courage to follow her heart, only for it to be a terrible mistake?

"Will you not sit down, Lord Solton?" asked her mother, biting her lip. Mrs Middleton was obviously overcome by having such a noble personage in her modest parlour. Especially one bearing such scandalous news. "I can send for tea."

Hugh smiled faintly but did not take his eyes off Ruth. "I thank you, Mrs Middleton, for your hospitality. Especially when I have called so suddenly, without prior notice." He took a deep breath. "Tea would be very welcome. I have been rushing around all morning. And I think that your daughter and I need to talk further about this."

Mrs Middleton nodded, ringing the bell. Tea was sent for. They all sat down awaiting it.

Hugh gazed steadily at Ruth. "Do you have any idea where they may have gone? It seems you are the only one that Miss Poldark has informed of her plans. I am afraid you are our best chance of finding her, Miss Middleton."

Ruth's heart lurched. It was so strange hearing him address her so formally, when the last time they had seen each other, they had embraced in passion. It was almost as if a stranger was sitting across from her. But of course, she knew he had to be like this towards her. Her mother was here, and he could hardly declare his feelings for her in the present situation.

Her heart lurched again. That was if his feelings for her remained unchanged. Perhaps he *had* moved on and realised there was never any chance for them. He was only here because of Patricia, after all. It wasn't to see her. And he hadn't made any other attempt to contact her since she had left Essex.

The tea arrived. Her mother poured, handing out the cups. Ruth tried to focus on his question. It was important that they find Patricia, given the fact that the gentleman she had run away with had a questionable reputation. She must put her own confusion aside for the moment, however painful that was.

"She made no mention of where they were going in her letter," she said, frowning slightly. "Only that she had finally realised they must be together and was willing to risk everything for their love. She said they were going far away."

Hugh frowned, too. "That *is* disappointing. She said they were going far away?"

Ruth nodded. "Yes."

He sighed, running a distracted hand through his hair. "I know that Carruthers has many connections in Bath. People who may help him

there.” He frowned deeply. “It might be clutching at straws, but I cannot think of anywhere else they could be hiding out.”

Ruth gasped, leaning forward. “She did say that they were going somewhere where her beloved feels most at home. *Could* it be Bath, then?”

Hugh’s eyes glittered. “That is a promising extra bit of information. Yes, I do think it could be. Carruthers grew up there, you see, before his family moved away. I know that he returns there often to see friends and conduct business. It would make sense that if he was on the run he would go there. He would have loyal people he could call upon.”

The parlour door opened. Her father stood there, gaping at them.

“What is going on here?” he asked slowly, staring at Hugh.

Hugh stood up, approaching him. “You must be Mr Middleton. I apologise, sir, for the intrusion into your home.” He paused. “I am Lord Solton, the Viscount Dalrymple. Your daughter stayed at my family estate recently. I have called to see if she can aid me in the search for Miss Poldark, who has gone missing.”

Mr Middleton gaped at him. “Gone missing? How so?”

Hugh’s face was grim. “Miss Poldark is claiming she has eloped. Apparently, your daughter received a letter from her. Her family have enlisted my family’s help in finding her.”

“A bad business, indeed,” said her father, shaking his head. “That a young lady from such a good family would do such a thing. Do you know the man she has run away with?”

Hugh nodded. “Yes, thanks to your daughter. He has a questionable reputation, and I am concerned for Miss Poldark.” He paused. “Your daughter and I have just been discussing it. We believe that perhaps they might have fled to Bath, as the gentleman has connections there.”

Mr Middleton nodded. “Well, that is a start.”

Ruth stared at her father. He was looking overwhelmed by Hugh’s presence in his house, as well. She tensed, waiting for him to perhaps make some reference to what had happened between them at Sandhurst Hall. He had declared that he believed the nobility dissolute and had talked disparagingly about Hugh, after all.

But if he was still angry at Hugh about what had happened, he wasn’t showing it. He looked almost dazzled by his presence. It seemed that he had decided to forgive and forget. Ruth suppressed a smile. She knew it was only because of Hugh’s high rank. Her parents had always been extremely deferential to those better than them.

Hugh gazed at him steadily. “Sir, could I make a request?”

Mr Middleton looked stunned. “Yes, My Lord. How can I be of assistance?”

“I need to go to Bath to search for Miss Poldark and endeavour her to return to the bosom of her family,” he said slowly. “Could I enlist your daughter’s help with my search? Could she possibly accompany me there? With a proper chaperone, of course.”

Ruth gasped in surprise. She hadn’t been expecting him to say that.

Her father had obviously not been expecting it either. He looked stunned, his mouth opening and closing, like a fish out of water. Her mother raised her eyebrows, turning swiftly to her daughter. Ruth tried to make her face as bland as possible. She desperately wanted to go with him, but she didn’t want to appear too eager.

“I...I do not know, My Lord,” said her father eventually. “You need Ruth’s help? How so?”

Hugh sighed. “Your daughter is the only person, as far as we know, that Miss Poldark has reached out to,” he said slowly. “If we manage to find Miss Poldark, then Miss Middleton might be the only one who she will listen to. The only one who may be able to talk sense to her.”

Her father nodded slowly. “I see.”

“I know it is an imposition,” continued Hugh. “But you have my assurance, sir, that I shall make sure your daughter is well taken care of and is in no danger. Miss Poldark’s aunt, Lady Clementine, can be called upon to chaperone. She is a lady of impeccable reputation. In addition, I will inform my father, the Earl of Montbatten, of our movements. I am certain he will travel to Bath immediately to help with the search and Miss Middleton will be under his protection as well.”

Her father nodded, digesting it all. Ruth's breath caught in her throat, as she waited for his decision. He had probably never expected to ever be in a position like this, where a viscount was begging him for help. Ruth knew her father would be deeply honoured and normally bend over backwards to accommodate such a request. But would what happened in the past—the threat of scandal at Sandhurst Hall, which had been averted—colour his thinking?

Time seemed to stretch out. She could barely breathe. She could see her father's mind racing furiously, as he tried to process the unusual request.

“My family would be honoured to be of assistance, My Lord,” he said eventually. “Most honoured! When would you be wishing her to be ready for the journey?”

Hugh smiled. “I shall need to organise Lady Clementine and one or two other things,” he said slowly. “Would first thing tomorrow morning be sufficient? I shall pick up Miss Middleton here.”

Her father nodded. “We shall make sure that Ruth is ready.”

Hugh bowed. “I am most grateful for your assistance. With God's grace we shall be successful in our endeavours.” He paused. “I shall take my leave now, so as to arrange everything. I bid you all a good day.”

Ruth and her mother stood up. Hugh nodded, his eyes lingering on Ruth for a moment before he swept out of the room.

There was a stunned silence.

“Well, that was most unexpected,” said her mother, obviously flustered, her cheeks pink. “Most unexpected indeed.”

“You don’t say,” said her father, looking equally dazed. “I can hardly believe it. To think, a *viscount* in my own home, seeking the help of my daughter!”

Ruth let out a sigh of relief. It seemed that her parents’ innate adoration of nobility had overcome their scruples about the potential threat of scandal. Hugh’s supposed questionable conduct towards her at Sandhurst Hall had been conveniently forgotten. For once in her life, she was grateful that her parents were so ambitious.

Her mother turned to her. “It seems we may have been wrong about the Viscount, Ruth. He turned to you immediately for assistance in this grave matter. He obviously values your opinion highly.” She paused. “And what a commanding air he has! Quite impressive and imposing.”

“He cuts a notable figure,” agreed her father, his eyes shining. “Very striking indeed.”

Ruth suppressed a smile. It had turned out better than she had thought it would. So much better. The entire day had flipped on its head. Only hours ago, she had been forced to entertain the insufferable Mr Albright. Her spirits had been so low; she had not been able to see a way out of her predicament.

But now...now, everything had changed. Patricia had stunned her by revealing the truth of why she had acted the way she did, begging her forgiveness. And then Hugh had arrived, requesting her help to find Patricia. Her parents liked him. They liked him very much indeed. Ruth knew they were only impressed by his lofty title and air of command, but that didn't matter. They had been willing to give him a chance and that was all she cared about at this stage.

It was as if a tiny ray of sunshine had finally broken through a dark cloud.

She sat back down, sipping her tea pensively. She still didn't know how Hugh felt about her now. But the fact he wanted her by his side to search for Patricia was promising. Perhaps it had merely been an excuse for them to spend time together?

She knew she shouldn't hope that it could all work out. But the hope sprang to life regardless.

Suddenly she felt ashamed of herself. Her friend might be in danger. She must focus upon Patricia. Whatever might happen with Hugh had to be pushed aside for the moment. But seeing him again, so unexpectedly, had shook her to the very core.

Hugh climbed into the carriage. His mind was awl with all he had to do. The first thing was call upon Lady Clementine and make sure she could chaperone them to Bath. Then he must call upon Miss Poldark's family to apprise them of these developments. Lastly, he

must write to his father at Sandhurst Hall, telling him where they were heading and to meet them there.

He sat back in the carriage, as it slowly meandered its way down the street. Seeing Ruth again had almost overwhelmed him. It had taken supreme control not to just take her in his arms and declare his feelings again. Of course, he couldn't do it, with her mother watching on. But it had been hard.

He sighed, staring out the carriage window. She looked as beautiful as he remembered. But also sad, beneath her shock at seeing him. He could sense the sorrow within her and the pain. It had not been any easier for her since they had parted than it had been for him.

It had been a spontaneous thing, asking her father to accompany him to Bath. It had come out of nowhere. He had even shocked himself. But as soon as he had made the request, he realised that perhaps it was their chance to repair what had happened between them. Apart from the fact that Ruth's presence *would* genuinely assist in the search for Miss Poldark.

Hope leapt to life in his heart. It was promising; much more promising than it had ever been. Patricia Poldark had reached out to Ruth, which meant she had clearly forgiven her for what had happened. His heart tightened. He was still angry at that young lady.

Furiously angry. For none of it had been real at all. She had obviously always been in love with the rake Carruthers and the whole scenario that she was sweet upon him had been an act. Which meant that she had separated Ruth from him for nothing at all.

He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. At least with Patricia

Poldark so clearly in love with another, it proved to Ruth that there was nothing standing in their way any longer. She couldn't claim that she was only protecting her friend in denying him now. That was something. It was a good start.

He frowned. But there wasn't only that to contend with. For Patricia Poldark had wrought more damage than that. She had slandered Ruth to his father. And until they found her, those lies were still an issue. An insurmountable issue. The only way he could get his father to give his blessing for any union between them was to find Patricia and get her to retract her lies to his father's face.

He knew his father very well. The Earl was usually a mild man, not given to strong opinions. He did not hold prejudice in his heart. But he was fiercely protective of the earldom and the estate. He would never countenance Hugh's union with Ruth if he thought her unworthy to become the Countess of Montbatten one day. He had already stated that plainly. And as far as the Earl was concerned, Ruth *was* still unworthy of that honour. She had been branded a liar and a thief. Her good name had been blackened.

His frown deepened. It was all still a complicated mess. And the only way to resolve it was still Patricia Poldark. He *must* find her. Not just for the sake of her family, but for his sake, as well. For the sake of his possible future with Ruth. It was their one and only hope.

Chapter 20

The next morning Ruth climbed into Hugh's carriage. Her heart was thumping uncomfortably. Sitting in the other corner of the vehicle was Lady Clementine, smiling at her benignly. It surprised Ruth how pleased she felt to see the old lady.

"Lady Clementine," she exclaimed. "Thank you so much for doing this!"

The lady nodded. "Of course, my dear. How could I refuse, when so much is at stake?" Her eyes were as round as saucers. "My heart is sore thinking of what my foolish niece has done! If it was not for her letter to you, we would be none the wiser as to her possible whereabouts, and completely in the dark about who the gentleman is. I should be thanking *you*, my dear. My whole family should be thanking you."

Ruth's heart flipped in her chest. "Oh, no. I only hope I can be of assistance! It is such a hard situation for everybody. Please be assured I will do my utmost."

Hugh got into the carriage, gazing at them both. His face was grim. "Are we ready? I want you both to be comfortable. It shall take us all day to get to Bath." He paused. "As luck would have it, my father owns a small house for when he desires to take the springs there. He rarely uses it, but I have written to make sure that the servants have it prepared for our arrival. That is where we shall be staying while we search."

Lady Clementine nodded. "Thank you, Lord Solton. And thank you for

your dogged assistance in trying to find my errant niece.” She fanned herself vigorously. “The shame of it! The Carruthers family have long been thorns in the Poldark’s side. To think that one of our own would do this is disgraceful.”

Ruth stared at her. “But what if it is truly a love match? What if this Jack Carruthers *does* love Patricia sincerely? Should we just judge him because of his family?”

“There is rather more to it than that, Ruth,” said Hugh, his lips thin with disapproval. “It is not just that there is animosity between the families. There is the fact that I know Jack Carruthers and he is not of good character. The chance that he is truly in love with Miss Poldark is slim. More likely he is having his wicked way and shall abandon her after the fact.”

Ruth blushed bright red. Lady Clementine looked shocked.

“I apologise for my bluntness,” he continued grimly. “But I must speak honestly. The situation demands it. The quicker we can find Miss Poldark and contain any scandal the better for your family, Lady Clementine.” He stared at Ruth. “Wishing the situation is any different to what it appears to be is not helpful.”

Ruth was stung. “I am only stating what she said in her letter to me, My Lord! Why would he have pursued her all the way to Essex, in the hope of seeing her and convincing her, if not for true love? I am only asking that you both keep an open mind about it. That is all.”

There was a strained silence in the carriage. Hugh gazed at her steadily. “I shall try to keep an open mind for your sake, Miss Middleton. But I do not want you to be under any illusions on the

matter.” He took a deep breath. “I know that your intrinsic sweetness wants you to believe that it is indeed a love match. But I am duty bound to do the right thing on behalf of the Poldark family.”

Ruth bit her lip. He was talking so coldly. He and the Poldark family had clearly already made up their mind upon the matter. Patricia was under the influence of a rake. They had probably not eloped, and Jack Carruthers was merely using her, planning to discard her. Ruth knew it all. But some part of her resisted it entirely.

Perhaps it was only wishful thinking. She fervently hoped it was a true love match. For she knew that Patricia was sincerely in love with Jack Carruthers. As for the motivations of the gentleman, she really couldn't say. But she didn't want Hugh to rush in like a bull at a gate and assume something that might not be true.

“I understand you must do your duty,” she said slowly. “We shall speak no more of it for the moment. I am ready to leave, if you are.”

He nodded, rapping sharply on the top of the carriage. The driver cracked the whip and then they were away, travelling through the streets of London, on their way to Bath. A town that she had never been to in her life, although she had heard much about it. Bath was a favourite place for many Londoners who desired to take the medicinal springs there.

She glanced out the window. She had said farewell to her parents in their parlour this morning, just before Hugh's carriage had pulled up. Hugh had been waiting for her on the front steps of her home. He had looked grim then, as well, and hadn't said much before whisking her into the carriage.

She gazed covertly at him. He seemed tense, still fraught with strong emotion. His mind was obviously preoccupied with this search for Patricia and the pressure the Poldark family was putting him under to deal with it quickly and cleanly. She knew that the threat of scandal hovered over them. It would only take one sighting of Patricia and her paramour for it to explode.

She blinked back tears. Since she had seen him again yesterday, they had not had the chance to talk privately at all. It was all so formal, their exchanges conducted in front of other people. He seemed remote, cold, almost the same as he had been when she first met him. And yet, he had specifically requested that she accompany him on this journey. Did he only want her along to help in the search for Patricia, after all?

Perhaps he *had* moved on. Perhaps he no longer had any feelings for her at all.

Her heart sank. If that was the case, it would make being around him so much harder to bear. She could almost wish that she wasn't around him at all. How would she be able to endure it? It would be like torture.

She took a deep breath. She *must* endure it, for Patricia's sake. She must push her own feelings aside for the moment. It was as simple as that.

After five hours of travel, Ruth was so weary and uncomfortable that she slowly fell into a restless sleep. She awoke with a jolt when the carriage stopped. She stared blearily out the carriage window.

“Have we arrived in Bath?” she asked breathlessly.

Hugh smiled grimly. “I am afraid not. We still have many hours of travel ahead of us.” He paused. “We have stopped at a roadside tavern for a rest. I can see that you need it. As does Lady Clementine.”

They got out. Ruth looked around. Hugh hadn’t lied. It was indeed a roadside tavern, solitary, with nothing around for miles. They made their way inside. Ruth felt stiff and a little disoriented as they sat down at a table. Hugh ordered food and drink on behalf of all of them.

Lady Clementine rose. She looked flushed. “I am afraid I need some air,” she said stiffly, not meeting anyone’s eye. “I shall be back directly.” She walked quickly away before either of them could reply.

Ruth watched the lady’s retreating figure. Lady Clementine was clearly in rather urgent need and could not say so in mixed company. Ruth suppressed a smile. They had been hours in the carriage, after all. It wasn’t surprising.

“What is so amusing?” asked Hugh, gazing at her steadily.

Ruth blushed. “Poor Lady Clementine. She seemed rather...*desperate*.”

Hugh’s face twitched in amusement. “Yes, she did. But she is such a lady that she felt there was no way of delicately telling us where she is really heading. I do hope she finds the facilities here are to her

satisfaction.”

Ruth laughed. Their eyes caught and held. She felt a shiver run through her, all the way down her spine.

“We are alone... at last,” he said slowly. “I despaired that it would never happen. How are you, Ruth? It seems so long since I have seen you, even though it has only been a few short weeks.”

Her blush deepened. “I have been trying to keep myself busy,” she replied slowly. “But it has been an adjustment...”

She stopped suddenly, not knowing what to say to him. She wanted to blurt out that those weeks had been the longest and most painful of her life. She wanted to tell him that she loved him, would always love him, and that she had been missing him desperately.

But there was a wall between them, and she did not know how to scale it, or indeed even if she should try. She still wasn't sure about his feelings towards her at all.

He cleared his throat. “Ruth...”

But at that moment, their food and drinks arrived. They didn't speak while their plates were placed in front of them. By the time the serving girl had left, Lady Clementine was back, looking abashed as she took her seat.

Ruth gazed down at her plate. Their brief moment to speak alone was gone. And she was still none the wiser, as to what was going to happen between them. If anything was at all. She had a sinking feeling that perhaps their chance at love was gone as well. Was it too late for them, even though one of the barriers to their love was gone, now that Patricia had admitted that she never truly wished to marry him and there was nothing to forgive?

She started eating, feeling despondent. It tasted like ashes in her mouth.

It was early evening by the time they finally reached Bath. Ruth wearily gazed out the carriage window, staring at the town.

“Oh, we have arrived,” said Lady Clementine, perking up a little. “How lovely. It is one of my very favourite towns. I do not spend enough time here at all.”

Hugh smiled. “It will not be long until we get to my father’s house, Lady Clementine. It has been a long journey indeed.” He paused. “I requested that a meal be prepared for when we arrive.”

Lady Clementine nodded. “I shall be taking a tray in my chambers this evening, My Lord! I am afraid I am too weary and will probably be abed before the hour is out.”

Hugh nodded. “As you wish, Lady Clementine. I completely understand.”

He glanced at Ruth. She bit her lip, staring down at her hands. It looked like they would be dining alone this evening. She wasn't sure whether that was a good or a bad thing, anymore.

She knew she should probably tell him she would retire straight to her chambers like Lady Clementine was intending to do. It would be the proper thing. They were not going to have a chaperone, of course. But she couldn't bring herself to do it. The thought of being alone with him again was just too tempting to resist.

She took a deep breath. She *would* dine with him. And she was determined to ask him directly what his feelings were towards her now. She needed to know. It was the only way she could think to go forward. The only way she could start to stitch her life back together...in whatever way that might be.

The house was on a street in the fashionable district of the town. Lady Clementine went straight to her guest chamber, retiring for the night. Hugh turned to Ruth, holding out his arm.

"Can I take you to the dining room?" he asked, in a quiet voice. "I have been informed that dinner shall be served directly."

She hesitated for only a moment. "Yes. Thank you."

In the dining room, they sat down. Hugh poured the claret himself into crystal wine glasses, handing one to her. Ruth took a deep sip. Butterflies were leaping madly in her stomach.

“Welcome to Bath,” he said slowly. “Have you ever been here before?”

She shook her head. “No. But I have heard much about it. It is a popular resort town, is it not?”

He took a sip of wine. “Yes. It has grown in popularity exponentially, over the last few decades. Everyone has discovered the mineral springs here, claiming they are beneficial for all sorts of ailments.” He paused, frowning slightly. “Do you want me to continue about Bath’s history? Or should we finally talk about that which is between us?”

Ruth took another deep sip of the claret, placing her glass upon the table. “I believe we should talk about it. If we are to spend time together searching for Patricia, then we need to resolve it, once and for all.”

He nodded gravely. “My sentiments exactly.” A short pause. “My feelings are the same, Ruth. I want to court you openly. Our weeks apart have not changed anything for me. Have they changed your feelings?”

There was a tense pause. Ruth’s heart flipped over in her chest.

“No,” she replied slowly, her heart racing. “My feelings have not changed at all. But is it possible, now? I can hardly dare hope.”

He hesitated. "I dare to hope. But I will not lie to you, Ruth. Miss Poldark might be enjoying her illicit love nest, but she has left much damage in her wake."

Ruth gaped at him. "How so?"

His face was grim. "I do not know quite how to tell you this," he said, in clipped tones. "But your friend told some rather vicious lies about you to my father, Ruth. Lies which have not been repudiated. And until we find her and convince her she must do it your good reputation has been destroyed in my father's eyes."

Ruth felt sick to her stomach. She gazed at him, unable to believe it was true. What had Patricia told the Earl?

"What did she say?" she whispered, almost unable to breathe.

Hugh's face tightened. "It is not good," he said slowly. "She told my father that you stole items from her, Ruth. She claimed you are a common thief." He paused. "And my father believed her. He had no reason not to. She is a relative, however distant, from good family. I am so sorry."

Ruth turned away, staring at the wall, desperately trying to hold back the tears. After all that she had been through, this almost hurt the most. Patricia had told bold lies about her to the Earl. Lies that slandered her character. She had indeed left much damage in her wake, just as Hugh had said.

She shuddered. She didn't know how they would recover from this at all. Patricia had never mentioned it in her letter. Perhaps she had forgotten. But until they found her, and she could repudiate it, Ruth was a thief in the Earl's eyes. He would probably never speak to her again, let alone contemplate letting his only son and heir court her.

Her heart lurched with sorrow. One thing was obvious. They were still doomed. It didn't matter what their feelings were at all, if they could not solve this.

Chapter 21

The township of Bath was full of fashionable ladies and gentlemen promenading down its wide, cobblestoned streets, when they all stepped out of the carriage the next morning. Ruth gazed around, taking it all in.

In normal circumstances, she would have been filled with excitement at being here, about to explore this town. But these were not normal circumstances at all. For in addition to trying to find Patricia, before scandal perhaps enveloped her, they were trying to find her for another reason. So that Ruth's own life would not be shrouded by scandal, as well.

She had barely been able to sleep last night, after Hugh had revealed it. He had hastily assured her that he was certain his father would not spread salacious gossip about her—that he wouldn't tell anyone what Patricia had said. But Ruth wasn't so sure. If the Earl believed that she was a thief, what was to stop him telling other people that she was?

But it wasn't just that disturbing thought which had kept her awake. The fact that she had lost the good opinion of the Earl caused her distress. She liked him enormously. Not only that, but he had let her stay in his home, made her feel so welcome. The thought that he now believed she had duped him, that she had behaved like a common thief, was quite frankly appalling.

Ruth took a deep breath, trying to stave off her worry. But it simply would not go away. She had allowed hope to spring into her heart, that perhaps there might be a way for her and Hugh to be together. But that hope was fading fast, now.

Unless they could find Patricia and get her to tell the truth to the Earl, she and Hugh simply had no chance. She knew that he would never go against his father's wishes upon the matter and nor did she want him to.

While Lady Clementine looked in a shop window, Hugh turned to her, studying her face closely. "You look very pale," he said, in a quiet voice. "I am so sorry I had to tell you what Miss Poldark did, Ruth. But I had no choice. My father shall soon be at the house, to assist with the search, and he will probably act differently towards you. You would have noticed something was gravely astray anyway."

Ruth nodded, her eyes swimming with tears. "Do not be sorry. You were honest with me, and I appreciate it, no matter how painful it is." She paused. "Do you think we shall be able to find her, and she will tell the Earl the truth?"

Hugh's face twisted. "You would know that better than me, Ruth. She is *your* friend, after all. You say that she begged for your forgiveness in her letter and admitted that she was wrong. I shall give her the benefit of the doubt for your sake and hope she will make amends...*if* we find her."

Ruth nodded, taking a deep breath. "I think that she will do it. What motivation could she now have for maintaining the lies? It would make no sense at all." She paused. "It was probably just the haste of her elopement which prevented her thinking about it. She must have forgotten she told the Earl those lies. Or else did not have time to pen another letter to him to tell him that they *were* lies."

Hugh's face tightened. "Perhaps. It does not matter much now. The important thing is to try to find her so that she can fix this." He scowled into the distance. "I am afraid I am still very angry with her."

Her letter to you only goes halfway to solving any of the mess she created. The sooner we find her the better.”

Ruth nodded, so upset she couldn't speak.

“Try to put it out of your mind,” whispered Hugh, gazing at her steadily. “I know it is hard, but we must focus on finding her now. All else can wait.” He paused. “You are simply the sweetest and most forgiving person I have ever met, Ruth. Most people would be frothing at the mouth after what I told you. But you are not railing against her. Why?”

Ruth's heart shifted. “What would it achieve? Besides, I have her letter. I know that she regrets what she has done. I truly believe she has just forgotten about this part of it, in the haste of running away. I believe that she will do the right thing by me, when the time comes.”

“You are incredible,” he said roughly. “I only hope I can deserve you, if I am lucky enough to get the chance.”

They gazed at each other steadily. Ruth felt like she was drowning in his gaze; as if she might lose herself entirely within his eyes. The spell was only broken by Lady Clementine approaching them.

“Let us begin,” said Hugh, taking a deep breath. “There is a small shop, tucked away in an alley not far away. A shop that I know is run by an old childhood friend of Jack Carruthers. It is as good a place as any to start.”

Ruth followed him into the shop, gazing around. Her jaw dropped open. She had never been in a shop like this in her life. She had never even known that shops like this existed.

“What is it?” she whispered, in awe.

Hugh grinned. “It is an apothecary, Ruth. An herbalist’s shop. People come here for all sorts of ailments.”

Ruth nodded slowly. She had heard of apothecaries, of course, but she had never been in one. There were jars lining the shelves, filled with all manner of strange potions and plants. She saw spindly, strange looking mushrooms. In addition, there were herbs hanging from the rafters. The combined smell was almost overwhelming; very strong and potent.

Lady Clementine was wandering through the aisles, picking up this and that, staring at the labels curiously. Hugh didn’t peruse any of it. He marched straight to the shop counter, where a small, bug-eyed man stood.

“Good morning,” he said, smiling faintly. “You are Mr Carlson, the apothecary?”

The man nodded. “I am, sir. How may I be of assistance?”

“I am Lord Solton,” said Hugh. “I believe that you are a close

acquaintance of Mr Jack Carruthers...”

The man’s expression grew wary. “Why do you need to know?”

Hugh sighed. “I am seeking Mr Carruthers for my own reasons. I would like to know if he is resident in Bath at the moment. It is most urgent that I find him.”

The man nodded. “I see. Well, I have not seen Jack for over three months. He comes and goes from the town.” He paused. “You do not see fit to share with me what this urgent business is about?”

“I am afraid it is a delicate matter,” said Hugh, frowning slightly. “Please be assured that it is urgent.” He reached into his jacket pocket, taking out a card, and passing it to the man. “If he does make contact with you, would you send word to this address? I would be most appreciative.”

The man nodded, placing the card on the counter. “I will let him know you are seeking him, if I see him. That is probably the best I can do. I will not just send word to you without his consent. He is a friend, after all, and for all I know you may be a debt collector pretending to be a lord to trap him, or some such thing. I hope you understand.”

Hugh’s face tightened. “I am not misrepresenting myself, sir. And it is imperative I locate Mr Carruthers.” He paused. “I wish you a good day.”

They left the store. Back on the street, Ruth turned to him, her face anxious.

“He will not inform you,” she said, in a strained voice. “And probably if he does see Jack Carruthers, it shall only tip him off that we are on their trail. If they are in Bath, they might up and leave, frightened away.”

Hugh nodded. “Yes, that may happen. It is a calculated risk. The other side of it is it may scare Carruthers enough to make him realise the severity of his course and make contact out of fear of repercussions.” He paused. “On the other hand, if they are indeed married, as Miss Poldark claims they were intending, and he is sincere, then he should have nothing to fear in the case, should he?”

Ruth looked doubtful. “I fear it is not as simple as that. They may be legally wed and his affection for Patricia genuine, but there is still the matter of the enmity between the families. That is the reason they could not court openly, after all. The reason they have been driven to this desperate action.”

She paused, shaking her head ruefully. “If their families realised that they indeed share a true love, then none of this would be necessary. True love should always triumph. Should it not?”

He gazed at her steadily, his eyes glittering. Ruth knew he wasn’t thinking about Patricia and Jack Carruthers any longer. And neither was she. She raised her chin, waiting for his response.

“True love can only triumph in the right circumstances,” he said eventually. “If responsibility and duty is ignored, how can it ever properly flourish?”

Ruth blinked rapidly, her heart sinking. She knew now that Hugh's affection for her had not changed, nor his desire. But he was telling her that their feelings for each other could not lead anywhere if they ignored their duty and pursued it without the blessing of their families and society.

If his father kept believing the lies about her and would never give his blessing to their union because of it, then he would not ask her to run away with him and the world be damned.

He would be willing to sacrifice their love for duty.

She took a deep breath. It hurt, that they may still have to give each other up, after all they had been through. After the pain and misery they had endured. But she did not blame him at all. In fact, she admired and respected him more for his opinion. One of the reasons she had fallen for him was because he was such a steadfast, tenacious man. It would be asking him to go against his character. And he would end up resenting her for all he had lost.

He kept staring at her. "There are more places to go. Let us not tarry. For I am committed to finding Miss Poldark and resolving this whole mess, Ruth. I want it with all my heart."

She nodded miserably, taking another deep breath. "Yes. Let us keep on with it. The day is young. We *will* find Patricia and it shall be all resolved."

But as they headed off, Ruth didn't know if she believed her own words. They didn't even know if the runaway couple were in this town. It was like looking for a needle in a haystack.

Later that afternoon, after they had visited around a dozen of Jack Carruthers's known friends or associates, they were forced to concede defeat for the day. No one had seen him or were willing to tell them if they had. In tense silence they headed back to the house. Ruth felt like her heart was made of stone.

She saw another carriage in the mews, as they disembarked. Her heart froze. The Earl was obviously here. Hugh stared at her as they made their way into the house, but she refused to meet his eye. She thought she might burst into tears.

They made their way to the parlour. The Earl was sitting in an armchair, reading a newspaper. He got up when he saw them, his mouth a grim line. His eyes rested for a moment upon Ruth, before turning to his son.

"I arrived just half an hour ago," he said, in clipped tones. "Have you had any success?"

Hugh shook his head slowly. "No, Father. We have visited quite a lot of his close acquaintances, to no avail. No one has seen him. Or are willing to tell me if they have."

The Earl shook his head in disgust. "This is a bad business, indeed!" His face swivelled to Ruth again. "I suppose we must thank you for at least getting us this far, Miss Middleton. But I am not happy that we have been forced to ask for your help in this matter. Not happy at all."

Ruth's breath caught in her throat. She had been expecting the Earl's disapproval, when he saw her, but it still hurt. It hurt unbearably. She didn't know what to say or do.

Hugh frowned. "Father, in light of Miss Poldark's recent actions, can you not concede that she may indeed have been lying about Miss Middleton? Miss Poldark's reckless behaviour proves she is not quite as trustworthy in her word as you may have once believed."

The Earl's face was sour. "I do not know what to believe any longer. It is all appalling. But even though I am mightily disappointed with Miss Poldark, I do not have any reason to disbelieve what she alleged about Miss Middleton. The two matters are not connected, as far as I can see."

"But they are," said Hugh, a desperate edge to his voice. "It is convoluted but the two matters *are* connected..."

"Enough," said the Earl abruptly, raising a hand towards his son. "I am weary after my long journey and cannot talk about this. I am only here to assist in the search for Miss Poldark." He paused. "I am going to head to the study for a restorative brandy. I shall see you at dinner, Hugh."

He left the room.

Ruth felt like her soul had just shrivelled entirely. The contempt the Earl now had for her was shocking. It was such a contrast to the sweet, mild man who had welcomed her into his home. And he was

resolute on the matter. He did not wish to hear anything about it. The only way that his mind could be changed was to hear that it was lies, from Patricia's own mouth.

Hugh sighed heavily. "I shall talk to him again, Ruth. Alone. He may be willing to listen to reason more without you there..."

"Do not bother," she said slowly, her heart twisting. "He is determined to think ill of me. Patricia is the only one who can convince him that none of what she said is true." Her eyes filled with tears. "Let us hope we find her soon."

His eyes were full of sorrow. But he nodded. Ruth knew he felt as helpless in this situation as she did. And she knew that the chance that they could ever be together was as remote as it had ever been.

Chapter 22

At the breakfast table the next day, there was tense silence. Hugh watched his father slice the top off a boiled egg, a frown upon his face. Lady Clementine was equally quiet, sipping her tea contemplatively.

He turned to watch Ruth. She was pale and miserable, visibly wilting beneath the disapproval of his father. She kept glancing at the Earl sideways, as if she wanted to address him, but did not have the courage. His father was ignoring her entirely. Hugh knew he wasn't happy at all that she was here, and they had enlisted her help, but he was putting up with it, for the sake of finding Patricia.

A pang of anger assailed him against Miss Poldark. He didn't know how Ruth was so understanding, willing to give her the benefit of the doubt. If it had been him—if he had been the target of such malicious lies—he could never have been so understanding of the person who had spoken against him. But that was Ruth. She was so sweet, so loyal and so empathetic.

He took a deep, angry breath. Patricia Poldark was lucky indeed to have Ruth as a friend. Not only was Ruth willing to give her the benefit of the doubt, but she had also forgiven her other trespasses against her as well. And she was helping in the search for her friend. She was convinced that Patricia and Carruthers were indeed a love match, because she so wanted her friend to be happy.

Ruth was one in a million. Her actions and behaviour since she had left Sandhurst Hall just proved that to him. How could he ever contemplate losing her?

His heart shifted in his chest. Unless they could find Patricia and get her to admit that she had spoken lies to his father, then they were doomed. A part of him wished he was the type of person who could just run away and elope, as Patricia and Carruthers had done, and the whole world be damned.

But he wasn't. It had taken a monumental effort for him to even overcome Ruth's obscure background and contemplate her seriously. The earldom was his life. He had been raised to one day become the next Earl of Montbatten. He took his duty seriously. If he eloped with Ruth, defying his father, it would cause a serious rift. His father might even cut him off entirely, leaving the earldom to someone else in the family.

He was caught, well and truly, between love and duty. Like a fly within a sticky web.

And the only solution to disentangling himself from it was Patricia Poldark.

Abruptly, he stood up, hastily wiping his mouth with his napkin before throwing it onto the table. They all looked at him.

"I shall prepare the carriage," he said quickly. "We should not tarry. I have thought of two other places we can go to today." He turned to the Earl. "What are your plans, Father?"

"I am going to the gentleman's club," said the Earl, frowning slightly. "I will ask around about Carruthers there. We shall reconvene in the afternoon."

Hugh nodded. He gazed steadily at Ruth. "Please be on the front steps, ready to leave, within twenty minutes."

She nodded. "Of course."

He strode out of the room. His heart was thumping uncomfortably. The only way out of this was action. And he was going to do his utmost to solve this. Even if he had to chase Patricia Poldark and Carruthers to the ends of the earth.

Ruth sighed wearily, as she followed Hugh down a cobblestone lane. They had been walking around all morning with no results. Lady Clementine was visibly wilting. Ruth stopped abruptly. Hugh turned, looking at her questioningly.

"I think we should rest for a minute," she said. "Lady Clementine is in need of it, and so am I."

Hugh frowned. "But we must keep on! There is no time to waste..."

Ruth stared at him. "My Lord, it will be time wasted, if this lady keels over. A half hour to replenish ourselves will not be much in the greater scheme of things."

Hugh looked shamefaced, running a hand over his face wearily. "Of course," he muttered. "I do apologise. I am just so desirous of finding them. I am not thinking clearly. We shall go back to one of the main streets and find some tearooms."

Ruth smiled gratefully at him. She didn't blame him. He was trying his hardest to resolve the situation, after all. And she knew it wasn't just for Patricia's sake. In fact, she didn't think Patricia's situation had much to do with it at all anymore. Hugh was only doing that out of duty to her family.

They found some nice tearooms, which were not too crowded. Lady Clementine settled into her chair, sighing appreciatively. Hugh ordered a pot of tea and a plate of sandwiches. Ruth gazed absently out the shop window, watching the fashionable ladies and gentlemen of Bath drifting past, without a care in the world, intent on shopping.

Her heart twisted. If only they could be tourists. If only they did not have this pressing matter hanging over their heads like the sword of Damocles, ready to swoop down and ruin their entire future.

Suddenly, she straightened in her chair, her heart lurching violently. A young lady was walking down the street, upon the arm of a tall gentleman. She was laughing, her eyes alight with joy, at something he had just whispered in her ear.

It was Patricia and Jack Carruthers.

Ruth got up, racing out of the tearooms and along the street. Patricia and Carruthers were weaving past some people. She lost sight of them for a moment. Her heart was racing so fast it was pounding in her ears. But then she saw them again.

They were just about to turn left, down another street. Desperately, she increased her pace. She was whizzing past people, who were all looking at her as if she was mad. But she didn't care. She didn't care about anything except getting to them.

At last. She reached out, taking Patricia's arm, spinning her around. Her friend was shocked, almost stumbling. And then, her face transformed with amazed joy, at seeing her.

"Ruth," she gasped. "What are you doing here?"

Ruth couldn't reply. She was panting and out of breath. Jack Carruthers was staring at her, obviously gobsmacked. And then, Hugh was there. He had clearly been running after her the whole time.

Patricia's head swivelled to face him. The joy was replaced with a sick trepidation.

"Oh," she gasped. "You are here together..."

"Miss Poldark," said Hugh, his face like thunder. "We have been searching for you all over this town. I have been sent on behalf of your family, who are extremely concerned for your welfare."

Patricia flushed. Jack Carruthers looked slightly ill. Ruth was suddenly conscious of the fact that people had stopped and were staring at them. They were making a public spectacle.

“Perhaps we should go to a more private place,” said Hugh curtly. “There are serious matters to discuss.”

They all headed back to the tearooms, where Lady Clementine was still waiting. Patricia and Jack Carruthers had the haunted look of condemned prisoners, who had just been told they had received the death penalty. Ruth felt sorry for them. She knew she probably shouldn't—that they had brought all this upon themselves, with their hasty action—but she felt it just the same. She had seen how they had looked at each other, as they had drifted down that street.

They *were* deeply in love. She knew it, in her innermost heart.

Lady Clementine looked faint. “Oh, Patricia,” she muttered, shaking her head sorrowfully. “What a merry dance you have led us on.”

Patricia coloured, unable to meet her aunt's eye. There was a strained silence at the table. What was going to happen?

Hugh cleared his throat, addressing Patricia. “Miss Poldark. Your family only wants your safe return. And to contain any scandal, that you may have caused, through your actions...”

Patricia gazed at him defiantly. “I am not returning home, Lord Solton. I am sorry for any pain I have caused my family, but it is not

an option. It never has been, and it never will be.” She took a deep, ragged breath. “We are legally wed. Mr Carruthers is my husband, for better or for worse.” She held out her hand, where a new gold ring encircled her wedding finger.

Ruth felt joy infuse her heart. They *were* legally married! Patricia had told her in her letter that they were intending to, and it had not been a ruse on Jack Carruthers’ part to lure her away and then discard her.

Hugh frowned. “I see.” He turned to Jack Carruthers. “You have made an honest woman out of her at least, Carruthers. That is something. I must admit I am surprised. But you must realise that both your families will never accept the union.”

Jack Carruthers stared at him. “I know. That is why we eloped, rather than plead with them.” He drew a deep breath. “But we decided that we would endure their disapproval, living estranged from them if we must. Because we love each other so much that the thought of living without each other forever was more painful than the alternative.”

Hugh was silent for a moment, digesting this. Ruth blinked back tears. The man had just declared his undying love for Patricia, and his conviction that they had done what they must. It was as she had always believed in her heart. It *was* a true love match.

“You are willing to live in virtual penury?” Hugh’s voice was grave. “Your family will probably stop your annuity, Carruthers. And the Poldark family will do the same with her. They will not hand over her dowry. Are you sure it is worth it?”

Jack Carruthers nodded, his eyes shining with conviction. “Our love is worth all if it, Solton. I was a broken man. I thought my life was over

without Patricia. But now, it is as if a new day has dawned.” He paused, gazing lovingly at his wife. “My wife is worth everything we have to endure. Everything that we must face going forward.”

Hugh coughed uncomfortably. Lady Clementine sighed. Patricia was gazing back at her husband, enraptured. It was as if they were alone in the room.

“Patricia has transformed my life,” continued Jack Carruthers, blinking back tears. “I was a very unhappy man before I met her. I know that you think me a rake, Solton. And I do not blame you. I was a cad. But my wife has changed all that. I am a different man now. And I am going to show her that I am worthy of what she has sacrificed for me.”

Patricia looked like she was going to melt. Hastily, Ruth looked away, out the window. It was so very touching that she thought she might burst into tears.

When she had controlled her emotion, she turned back, addressing Hugh.

“I know that both their families will be stubborn,” she said slowly. “But you hold sway with them. Could you not try to convince them to accept this union? That they are truly committed to each other?”

Hugh was silent for a moment. He gazed at Ruth steadily. Their eyes met and held. Ruth felt like she could barely breathe.

He nodded. “I am willing to do that.” He turned to the gentleman. “I

will not lie, Carruthers. I did think you a rake, and that you had persuaded Miss Poldark to run away with you, with no intention of ever marrying her.” He hesitated. “But you have convinced me that you do truly love her and are committed to this marriage. I cannot promise that either of your families will forgive and forget. But I will do my utmost to persuade them. I will advocate on your behalf. I promise.”

Patricia looked like she was going to faint with pleasure. Jack Carruthers was obviously over the moon as well.

“Thank you, Solton,” he said, in a gruff voice, heavy with emotion. “Thank you.”

Hugh smiled slightly. “Do not thank me yet. For it is conditional.” He turned to Patricia. “Miss Poldark. I hardly need remind you of the circumstances under which you left Sandhurst Hall. You have tried to remedy your wrongs by writing to Miss Middleton, begging her forgiveness. But there is another, more pressing matter, which you need to remedy.”

Patricia blushed furiously. “You are talking about what I told the Earl about Ruth, are you not?” She looked shamefaced. “I am intending to write to him, to tell him the truth, but we have been so rushed...”

“You do not need to write to him,” said Hugh. “He is here in Bath, assisting in the search for you. You may tell him to his face. Do you agree?”

Patricia’s eyes shone with tears. “Of course, I agree. I will do anything to repair the damage I have caused to you both.” She turned to Ruth, taking her hand. “I am so sorry, dearest. So desperately sorry...”

Ruth's heart lurched. This was her dear friend. The friend who had taken her under her wing, when no one else would. The friend who had championed her, despite her obscure connections, and poor background. The friend who had introduced her to Hugh.

She forgave her, completely and utterly, in that moment. She knew that the way Patricia had acted at Sandhurst Hall was not really her. Her friend had been in desperate pain and let bitterness overwhelm her. But she was sorry now for all that she had done. And more importantly, she was willing to humble herself before the Earl and admit that she had lied about Ruth.

"It is alright, dearest," whispered Ruth, one tear sliding down her face. "All of it will be alright."

Her friend embraced her. Ruth met Hugh's eyes over her shoulder. For the first time, since she had seen him again since Essex, there was hope there. A wild hope. Her own heart lurched with it, as well. She had just assured Patricia it was all going to be alright.

All they had to do now was convince the Earl that was the truth.

Chapter 23

The Earl was sitting in the parlour, when they all entered the house. He gazed up, astonished, when he saw Patricia and Jack Carruthers, lagging behind the group. He leapt to his feet, rushing towards them.

“Oh, my Lord,” he exclaimed, shaking his head in disbelief. “You have been productive, Hugh! You have found our prodigal!” He turned to Patricia. “We have been so worried about you, my dear. So very worried. Your family are bereft.”

Patricia sighed heavily. “I know, My Lord. I am very sorry for it, but it could not be helped.” She took a deep breath. “We shall talk about that soon. But there is a more urgent matter, that must be dealt with.”

The Earl frowned. “Which is?”

Patricia glanced at Ruth, who nodded encouragingly. She knew how difficult this was for her friend. Admitting that she had deliberately lied, in such a calculating way, and slandered Ruth would not be easy. Ruth’s heart flipped over in her chest.

“I told you some grave things about Miss Middleton,” said Patricia, taking a deep breath. “I told you she was a thief. That she had taken personal items from me without my permission.” She paused. “I lied, My Lord. Ruth never did any of those things. She is no thief. She is the most loyal, trusting friend a girl could have. Her character is exemplary.”

There was a strained silence. The Earl stared at her, obviously shocked and disappointed.

“Why would you have done such a thing, Patricia?” he asked, in a quiet voice. “I do not understand at all.”

Patricia blushed fiercely. “I have no excuse for my appalling behaviour, My Lord. The only reason I can offer is I was heartbroken and bitter. I thought that my true love was lost forever.”

She took a deep, ragged breath. “I decided, in my pain and confusion, to focus my attentions on your son. When I found out about the affection between him and Ruth...that I was to be disappointed in that endeavour, as I had been disappointed in love...well, I suppose I lost my mind a little.”

The Earl sighed, frowning. “You alleged those things about Miss Middleton out of pure spite? Because you wanted to ill wish what was between my son and the lady?”

Patricia nodded slowly, tears streaming down her cheeks. “I am not proud of myself. In fact, I despise myself, more than anyone else ever could. It was that hate which made me realise I could not deny my love for Jack any longer. I was turning into someone I loathed. I knew I would turn into a bitter, vindictive woman.”

“So...there is no truth to what you said about Miss Middleton? None at all?” The Earl stared at her sharply. “Because it is important, my dear, that you tell the honest truth now. There is rather a lot resting upon it.”

Patricia sobbed. "There is no truth to what I told you. None at all. I lied, My Lord. I am utterly ashamed of myself. Please, you must not think ill of Miss Middleton."

The Earl nodded, looking strained. "Very well. I shall take your word for it." He turned to Ruth. "I apologise, my dear. I hope you understand that I had to be cautious about you. But for my part, I have always liked you well. I was more disappointed than I could say when Miss Poldark said those things about you."

Ruth blinked back tears. "I understand, My Lord. I do not blame you in the least." She took a deep breath. "I am just so very grateful that it is cleared up at last. Your good opinion means so much to me."

The Earl smiled. "You have my good opinion, my dear." He turned to Hugh. "You advocated on Miss Middleton's behalf, Hugh. You never faltered in the belief that she was the victim of slander. I owe you an apology as well, my boy. I should have trusted your word, for you have never let me down."

Hugh clapped his father on the back. "All is well that ends well, Father." He turned to Patricia and Jack Carruthers. "I am afraid I was mistaken in my belief about Miss Poldark and Mr Carruthers, however. They are legally wed and very much in love. They have asked me to advocate on their behalf to both their families to accept it and I am willing to do so."

"Indeed," said the Earl, raising an eyebrow. "Well, if you believe that is for the best, then I fully support you. I shall put in a word on their behalf as well." He smiled at Patricia and her husband. "You have both caused a bit of a stir, but I am willing to forgive and forget if it is in everyone's best interests."

“Thank you, My Lord,” said Jack Carruthers, his voice breaking. “I apologise that we have forced you from your home. You have my word that I dearly love Patricia and shall treat her like gold. We are committed to living our life independently if we must, but if we can get the approval of our families, it would mean the world to us.”

The Earl nodded. “Rest assured that we shall do our best, Carruthers.” His smile broadened. “Now, how about we all have a sherry, to celebrate a good result all round! We shall let bygones be bygones.”

The sherries were poured and passed around. Ruth stared at Hugh. She felt as light as air. Only a few hours ago, the weight of it all had felt like a heavy stone within her chest. But now, she was free of it all. Patricia had vindicated her reputation with the Earl. Her friend was a married woman and deliriously happy with her husband. It was exactly as the Earl had said. It *was* a good result all round. In fact, it was more than she had dared hope.

“To your happy marriage,” said the Earl, raising his glass.

They all raised their glasses in agreement, toasting the happy couple. Jack Carruthers put an arm around his wife, gazing at her in rapture. Patricia seemed to glow beneath his obvious adoration. Ruth’s heart shifted with emotion just watching it.

“To the happy couple,” she said, before sipping her sherry.

Patricia beamed at her. “Thank you for your good wishes, Ruth. I am so happy to have your friendship back. I have missed you.”

“And I have missed you,” said Ruth, blinking back tears again. “I am so very glad that we have a clean slate, Patricia.”

Hugh was gazing at Ruth, his eyes shining. She gazed back at him. She knew that he was thinking the same thing as she was. For now that she had been vindicated to the Earl, they were finally free, to dream of a possible future together. But the final hurdle needed to be overcome. They needed to get the Earl’s blessing.

That evening, Hugh knocked on his father’s study door. His heart was racing. He had been wanting to speak to him all day, ever since the dramatic events unfolded, but just hadn’t had the chance. Patricia and her new husband had stayed all afternoon and then dined with them. The newlyweds had only left an hour ago.

Ruth had just retired. He had dared to surreptitiously sneak into her chamber, indulging in a fevered kiss. She had clung to him, burying her head into his chest. He had never felt quite so happy in his life. They had not only found Patricia and Jack Carruthers, but Ruth’s reputation had been fully restored to his father.

They were free. There was nothing standing in their way any longer.

“Come in,” called the Earl.

Hugh entered. His father was sitting in an armchair, reading a book.

He closed it with a snap.

“I was wondering when you would come,” said the Earl, smiling wryly. “I could see you have been like a cat on hot bricks all day, my boy.”

Hugh smiled. “Am I so transparent?”

“Just to me,” said his father, winking. “Well, come and sit down!”

Hugh did his bidding, taking a deep breath. He felt more nervous than he had ever felt before in his life. So much was rising upon what his father would say now. For even though he had believed Patricia, and his good opinion of Ruth was restored, that still did not mean that he would give his blessing for them to marry.

Ruth was still poor and obscure. That would never change. But he had to believe that it was no longer an insurmountable object. Because he simply did not care about it at all. He wanted her for his wife, and he would have no other woman. Would he be able to articulate that to his father clearly?

The Earl leaned forward, studying him intently. “I am going to just put you out of your misery, my boy.” He took a deep breath. “If you have come to ask for my blessing to propose to Miss Middleton, then you have it freely.”

Hugh was stunned. “Truly? You mean it?”

The Earl nodded. "I do. I have watched you carefully since Miss Middleton left Sandhurst Hall, Hugh, and I know how much you have suffered. You were in agony over her." He paused. "I just needed to hear from Patricia's own lips that it was a bunch of lies. I was starting to suspect it. But until that was cleared up, I could not encourage you. I hope you understand."

Hugh felt tears of pure joy spring into his eyes. He had never felt so elated. All the worry and anxiety vanished like a puff of smoke. He was so overwhelmed he couldn't even speak.

"Miss Middleton shall make a fine countess," continued his father pensively. "And I do not care a whit about her background or family, Hugh. I truly do not. She is a true lady, in every sense of the word. She has been very well brought up. She is very accomplished, clever and has lovely manners. Really, you could not have done better."

Hugh was almost bursting with pride hearing his father's praise of Ruth. "I know. I have never met a lady like her before. She is one of a kind and I do not deserve her."

His father smiled. "People will gossip, of course. They shall say she is a fortune hunter, that she is marrying above her station. All the usual things. But we can weather that storm. I have never cared overmuch for society's good opinion, anyway." He paused. "Let them say what they will!"

Hugh got up. He couldn't help himself. He leant down, enveloping his father in a bear hug. His father stiffened in surprise, before relaxing. They had never been overly demonstrative with each other. But if there was ever an occasion to hug each other, this was it.

“Well, that is done,” said his father gruffly. “All you need do now is win the hand of the lady, Hugh.”

Hugh straightened, grinning. “I intend to.”

He said good night, leaving the room. He was so euphoric he wanted to march straight to Ruth’s chamber and tell her the news right now. But then he paused. He didn’t want it to be a rushed affair. She was already in bed and probably fast asleep after all the drama of the day. He didn’t want to wake her. It had waited this long. What was another night, after all?

He retired to his own chamber. But once within, he knew he wouldn’t be able to sleep. He was too restless and excited. He sat by the window, gazing out at the street below. There was one solitary gaslight flickering. No one was about. It was as silent as the grave.

It was finally over. All the agony of the past weeks was resolved, at long last. He could scarcely believe it was true. When Ruth had risen from the table that day, running out of the tearooms as if she was being pursued by a banshee, he had no idea that she had spotted Patricia and Jack Carruthers on the street.

Shocked, he had taken off after her. He could still see her running along the street, dodging people, who were all staring at her as if she had taken leave of her senses. Her grim determination, her single-minded focus, was obvious.

And then...he had seen why. She had found them. They had been searching for two days and come up with nothing. And she had just been looking out the window and there they were.

He shivered now, thinking of how different it could have been. If she had not been looking out the window at that particular moment, or the newlyweds had chosen not to go down that particular street. If they hadn't stopped for refreshment. So many variables. They might never have found them at all.

He was not a fatalistic man. But he couldn't help thinking now that it was destiny that had led them to those tearooms today. It had seemed up until now that everything had been stacked against them; that they would never resolve any of it. And then, it had all fallen into place, so neatly that he still could not quite believe it.

He smiled slowly. They had thought they would probably never get to this moment. And now that it had finally come, he was going to make it as special as he could. He was going to show Ruth exactly how much he cared for her, when he asked for her hand in marriage. It was going to be a truly memorable occasion. He thought they deserved it, after all they had been through. And Miss Ruth Middleton was worth it all.

He had meant what he said to his father. He didn't deserve her. Ruth might be poor and obscure, but she was superior in every way. He knew he wouldn't find another woman like her if he searched for a hundred years. He didn't give a whit about what society said any longer. None of that mattered.

Hearing Patricia and Jack Carruthers talk about their devotion to each other today in the tearooms had brought it all home to him. They didn't care about what society thought at all. Their love was worth all the pain. And if they could do it—have such bravery in the face of censure—then he could do it, too. For he loved Ruth with the same blind devotion.

She was worth it. She was worth everything. It was as simple as that. All the complications had finally unravelled, and the way forward was clear. It was like staring into a bright new sun. As if the world was only just beginning, just for the two of them.

There was just one final thing now. To win the hand of the lady...at long last.

Chapter 24

Ruth was bursting with happiness as she climbed into the carriage the next day. Hugh was taking her out somewhere. She had no idea where they were going. He was being maddeningly secretive about it. All he had told her was that she had to be ready within half an hour after breakfast, before he had headed out, saying he wouldn't be long.

He climbed in beside her now. The Earl and Lady Clementine were standing on the front steps of the townhouse, beaming and waving at them. They were obviously in on the secret. She had seen Hugh whispering to both of them in the foyer, as she had descended the staircase. They had stopped talking as soon as she was in earshot, jumping apart like scalded cats.

He grinned at her, his eyes shining. "Ready?"

She smiled back. "I suppose so. As ready as I can be for something that I have no idea about, of course." She paused. "Where exactly *are* we going, My Lord?"

His smile widened. "You shall see. All will be revealed very soon." He paused. "You must have patience, Miss Middleton."

He rapped on the top of the carriage sharply. The driver cracked the whip and then they were away. Ruth sighed, staring out the window. It was the most beautiful summer's day. The sky was the clearest blue and the sun was shining brightly. And most important of all, she was with Hugh. The only man she would ever love.

She was bursting with curiosity about what he had planned, but she wouldn't push him anymore. He wanted to keep it a secret. And as long as she was with him, nothing else mattered, anyway.

Life had just suddenly taken on a whole new shine.

The carriage drew up alongside a winding river. Hugh helped her out of the carriage, before taking a wicker basket that a footman handed down to him. Ruth's eyes widened. So that was what the secret was. They were about to have a picnic.

She clapped her hands together gleefully. "Oh, what fun! A picnic!"

He smiled archly. "Indeed. But it shall not be for a little while yet. There is something else we must do before we can partake of this basket's delights." He held out his arm to her. "Shall we?"

She nodded, wondering what on earth he was talking about. They started walking towards the river. It was shining like silk in the bright sun. Ruth gazed around, noting the impressive bridge ahead.

"Bath is a beautiful town," she said, her eyes bright. "I am so very glad I can finally appreciate it!"

Hugh nodded. "It is nice to play tourist after all the drama, is it not? I

must say Bath has always been one of my favourite towns. I come here quite regularly now that Father has a house here. The springs are very refreshing. I shall have to take you to them before we leave.”

Ruth felt a stab of joy. It was on the tip of her tongue to ask again how it had gone between him and the Duke last evening, but then she stopped herself. He would tell her in his own good time. And she hardly thought the Earl *hadn't* given his blessing, now. Hugh was far too jovial, and the Earl had been in very good spirits, as well. But Hugh had remained silent on that matter, as well.

“I would love to take the springs,” she said breathlessly.

They had reached the riverbank. Hugh’s smile widened.

“Here we are,” he said.

Puzzled, she stared at him. “What do you mean?”

“The boat,” he said, pointing to a small rowing boat that was bobbing in the water. “I am taking you rowing, Ruth.”

She gasped with delight. “Truly? I have never been rowing before!”

He helped her into the boat, placing the picnic basket at her feet, before taking the oars. Within minutes, they were in the middle of the river, rowing down towards the bridge. Ruth gazed around, entranced. It was magical...and the most beautiful surprise. Her eyes filled with

tears. How thoughtful he was. He had obviously gone to a lot of effort to arrange this.

“So, this is the reason you hurried out after breakfast,” she said, smiling widely. “To arrange this boat for us.”

“Among other things,” he said, giving her another secret smile.

They drifted beneath the bridge and then further downstream. The grand buildings of Bath glided past them.

“What is the name of this river?” she asked, letting her hand glide along the water.

“The River Avon,” he replied. “It is a long river, running all the way from Gloucestershire, and through Wiltshire.”

Suddenly, he stopped rowing, pulling in the oars. The boat bobbed gently in the middle of the river. They were all alone. There wasn't any other boats rowing by. A solitary bird circled overhead. They could be the only people on the earth.

“I simply cannot wait any longer,” he said, his eyes shining. “Ruth...if I have not told you before, then I must tell you now. I think that you already know, but it is important to put it into words. I must tell you how much I love and adore you.”

Ruth gasped. Her eyes filled with tears. Hearing those precious words

from his lips was like nectar from the gods. How was it possible, that they were even here, in the middle of this beautiful river? How was it possible that this moment had finally arrived?

She had dreamt of this. She had fervently hoped. But she had never truly believed it was possible. There had simply been too many obstacles in their way. First their own caution about falling in love with each other, believing they were not suited. Then Patricia, and the Earl.

It had all been stacked against them from the start. But Hugh had been tenacious, and he had been patient. He had waited for the moment to start overcoming those obstacles. He had proved to her, many times over, that his affection for her was real. That it wasn't simply a passing fancy that would soon wither on the vine.

He loved her. He had shown her through his actions. He had shown her in the way he gazed at her and spoke to her. He had shown her through the fevered touch of his hands, and his lips. She knew that he truly did love her. She didn't doubt it for a moment.

"I love and adore you, too," she whispered, swallowing a painful lump in her throat. "So much. More than I ever dreamt possible. It is as if I was not truly alive before I met you. You have opened my eyes to the world, and I am born anew through you."

He reached out, taking her hand. His eyes were burning with passion.

"Ruth Middleton," he said slowly. "Will you do me the honour of becoming my wife?"

The tears were silently streaming down her cheeks now. She didn't even attempt to stop them or wipe them away. She nodded her head. She felt as if she was in the midst of a wonderful dream. Should she pinch herself, to see if she would awaken soon?

"Yes," she whispered. "Oh, yes, yes, yes."

"My love," he cried, folding her into his arms. "You have made me the happiest man in the world."

His lips found hers. Softly, gently, he kissed her. His lips were featherlight and tender. Ruth knew that she would never forget this kiss. It would be engraved upon her heart forever.

The kiss ended. He pulled back, reaching into his jacket pocket, taking out a small black velvet box. He opened it. Ruth gasped. Nestled inside was a gold ring, with a solitary diamond in the centre. He took it out, taking her hand and sliding it onto her finger.

"Oh, it is so beautiful!" she gasped, holding up her hand to admire it. "And it fits perfectly! I do not have words, Hugh. I am overwhelmed. I have never had anything so beautiful in my life."

"A beautiful ring for a beautiful lady," he said, smiling at her delight. "That was the other reason I went out this morning. I was waiting on the steps of the jewellery shop before it even opened. I was the first customer of the day. The jeweller was very pleased."

She laughed with joy. "I imagine he would have been well pleased!"

She paused. "You are a very sneaky fellow. And your father and Lady Clementine were obviously involved in all of it, as well. I saw how you were whispering in the foyer."

Hugh laughed. "It is true. I was showing them the ring and they were both giving their blessings. I swore them both to secrecy." He paused, gazing at her steadily. "But you must have guessed that I would be asking you to become my wife today."

She nodded. "I did suspect. But I had no idea you would go to all this trouble, to make it so special." Hastily, she wiped her tears away. "You are the most thoughtful and caring man in the world, Lord Solton. I truly do not deserve you."

His eyes darkened. "I am the one who does not deserve you, Ruth. You have proven how special you are, over and over. The way that you conduct yourself, with such grace and aplomb. You have no reason to think yourself inferior. You are better than the grandest lady in the land. And I am so honoured that you have agreed to become my wife."

"I am not so special," she said, blushing with pleasure. "I am simply the daughter of a solicitor from Cheapside." Her eyes widened dramatically. "Oh, I just realised, that I shall one day be a *countess*. How is it possible? I feel like I am in the midst of a dream."

She gaped at him, so overcome, that she couldn't speak any further. It was strange, but she had never truly thought about it before. She had been so desirous to simply become his wife that she had pushed the thought of the title to the back of her mind. But now, it had reared up, forcing her to acknowledge it. The fact that she would one day have that grand title. One of the most noble in the land. An earl was just below a duke.

In the meantime, Hugh was a viscount. And she would become a viscountess. A real lady. The humble girl from Cheapside, who had felt so out of place amongst good society, was rising very high indeed. So high that she felt dizzy.

Hugh laughed easily. "It is not so very hard, my love. You shall rise to the occasion. You shall make a perfect viscountess and then countess one day. By the time that happens, it will be like slipping on a glove. Believe me."

She nodded, biting her lip. All of her old feelings of unworthiness were rising to the fore. Firmly, she pushed them aside. She was not going to spoil this special day by worrying about such things.

She took a deep breath. The future could take care of itself. Besides, she was more than willing to take it all on now. The thought of the alternative—of giving him up, living without him, and probably eventually being forced to marry a man like Mr Albright—filled her with blind panic.

Their love had overcome so many obstacles already. It would overcome this, as well.

"Come on," he said, picking up the oars again. "Let us find a perfect picnic spot. We do not want all that food in the basket to go to waste, do we?"

She shook her head, smiling at him. They set off down the river. But she was not the same person who sat in that boat any longer. A single lady had stepped into it. Now, a betrothed lady drifted along the river.

She was entirely new, born again through his love, just as she had told him.

They found a secluded, shady spot, underneath a big willow tree. Hugh set up the picnic. Ruth gasped with delight at all the goodies packed within. There were sandwiches, pickles, a big wedge of cheese and a bottle of lemonade.

They ate slowly, taking their time, gazing at the sun sparkling on the water. After they had eaten their fill, they lolled underneath the tree, too full to do anything for the moment. Hugh placed his head in her lap, gazing up at her. She trailed a hand down the side of his face, her heart overflowing with love.

“Is it true?” she whispered. “I still think that something will stop it. That it cannot be this easy. I fear that some other obstacle will rear up to stop us.”

He nodded, his face grave. “It is true. We are to be married, Ruth. And nothing is going to stop us, ever again. We have overcome everything, and we shall do it again if need be. There is nothing stronger than our love.” He paused. “You know, it was seeing Patricia and Carruthers together yesterday that finally made me realise the utter truth of it. If they could overcome their obstacles to love, then so could we.”

“Thank you for being so understanding,” said Ruth, her heart flipping over in her chest. “I know you were convinced that Jack Carruthers was a cad and that it could not be a love match. But you were willing to listen to them and more importantly, believe them. And promising to advocate on their behalf to their families was so very kind.”

His eyes darkened. "I did it for you, Ruth. Everything I have done is for you. You must understand that. You are my whole world now. I could not live without you. I *will not* live without you."

She gave a shuddering sigh. "And I could not live without you either, my love. I am the luckiest girl in the world. I cannot wait to become your wife."

He reached up, taking her head, pulling it to his own. They kissed again, slowly and languorously, sealing their love. The commitment they had made to each other. Ruth knew that it was more sacred than the vows they would make in a church. Because it was just for the two of them alone.

And now, all the worries about whether she was worthy or not vanished. Hugh believed in her and that was all that mattered. And if he believed in her, then she could believe in herself.

The future spread before them, as seamless and perfect as the river. There might be choppy waters now and then. There might even be storms. But as long as they were by each other's side, they could weather it all. She had never been more certain of anything in her life.

Chapter 25

Sandhurst Hall, Three months later

The glorious summer was finally over, Ruth thought, as she gazed out the window. The leaves on the trees had turned russet gold and red. There were still sunny days, here and there, but they had mostly gone.

They were in the midst of autumn. Strong winds were blowing, making the branches of the trees crack and sway. Soon, the autumn leaves would fall to the ground, and the trees would become spindly skeletons. Beyond that, the days would turn shorter and colder, as they headed into winter.

Her heart lurched. That glorious summer was gone, but it would live forever in her memory. For it was now an eternal summer, when she had first met her love. The summer when her life had changed forever, and she had been reborn beneath the heat of the days.

“Ruth,” called Patricia. “My dear. You cannot tarry! You are not yet ready.”

Ruth turned away from the window, smiling at her friend. Patricia looked so lovely in her muslin gown of the palest pea green, her hair a shining cap of gold. Her friend’s eyes were large and shining with joy. But she also looked harried.

“Come on,” she said, gesturing to Ruth. “There are final things to be done!”

Ruth laughed, walking back to the centre of the room, where Patricia and the maid Bessie waited for her. She thought they were both more nervous than she was. Bessie held a small piece of expensive Valenciennes cream lace in her hand. Patricia held a small garland of orange blossom.

Ruth took a deep breath. The final touches. The crowning glory to her wedding outfit.

She stood in front of the full-length mirror. Bessie expertly attached the small veil to her head, pinning it securely. Then Patricia placed the garland atop it. Ruth turned to stare at herself in the mirror.

It was as if another woman entirely stood there. A woman she did not recognise at all. A tall, confident woman, dressed in the most elegant cream silk and lace gown, with puffed sleeves. Her brown hair had been ringleted, hanging down her back in fat, brown curls. A woman whose dark eyes were shining with excitement and joy.

There was no trace of the insecure, apprehensive girl who had first arrived at this house so long ago. Ruth peered closely at the mirror. Was she still there, just beneath the surface? Was she hovering around this more confident woman, waiting to reappear, when she least expected it?

“Oh, how beautiful you are,” breathed Patricia, standing behind her, placing her hands upon Ruth’s shoulders. “You shall be the bride of the season, Ruth!”

Ruth laughed. "I highly doubt *that*, Patricia! There are not going to be very many high society guests at the ceremony or the wedding breakfast, after all." She paused, her mouth twitching in amusement. "I hardly think I shall make the society pages. They shall all snub our marriage, or if they deign to mention it, it shall be in shocked whispers. You know that as well as I do."

Patricia's mouth was set in a stubborn line. "Well, if that is the case, then it is *their* loss, dearest! And besides, they shall all come around eventually. How could they not, when you are the sweetest lady of them all?"

Ruth put a hand upon Patricia's, squeezing it. How loyal and loving her friend was. She truly did not think she could have survived the last few months without her support. For when Hugh had formally announced their engagement, it was as she had feared.

The ton were astounded that the future Earl of Montbatten was marrying such an obscure and poor lady. Who was Miss Ruth Middleton at all?

Ruth had heard the gossip, all whispered behind her back, of course. That she was a blatant fortune hunter. That she had tricked Lord Solton into marriage—that perhaps she was in the family way. That she was a conniving, scheming minx. Why else would such a great man condescend to marry the daughter of a solicitor from Cheapside?

It had been exactly as she had feared. But somehow, she didn't care anymore. Let them say what they wanted about her. She didn't have to prove her love for Hugh to them. Her fiancé knew the truth, as did all those closest to them. She could brave anything for their love.

Patricia had defended her to everyone. Her dear friend and her husband had been forgiven by their families and been taken back

into the fold, thanks to Hugh advocating on their behalf. The influence of Lord Solton had held much sway with both families. There had not been a whisper of scandal about them. They lived now in a fashionable, if modest, house in London, blissfully happy.

The door opened. Ruth's mother stood there, looking slightly agitated. She was dressed in a new gown of silk lavender, which was obviously rather tight, judging by the way she was breathing. Or perhaps she had laced her corset just a tad too tight.

"Ruth," she rapped, her eyes wide. "The carriage is awaiting you! You cannot be late for your own wedding day!"

Patricia laughed, squeezing Ruth's shoulders. "Oh, but she can, Mrs Middleton! It is a bride's prerogative, after all!" She paused. "But Ruth is ready now, at any rate. Shall we, dearest?"

Ruth smiled slowly. "Yes, we shall. I am ready. Do not fuss, Mama. All shall be well."

Her mother sighed heavily, obviously not appeased. She probably wouldn't fully relax until the moment the wedding ring had been slipped onto Ruth's finger. Ruth knew her mother still couldn't quite believe that her daughter had made such an advantageous match. It was a dream come true for her, and her father, but it was almost too much. They were anxious as well as over the moon with pride, as if they thought it might be snatched away from Ruth at any moment.

They went down the stairs. Her father was waiting for her on the front steps of the house, almost bursting with pride. For the first time in his life, Mr Middleton looked like he was lost for words, when he saw Ruth. He shook his head in astonished joy.

“There you are,” he said, in a gruff voice. “Come, Ruth. How lovely you are. We must not keep Lord Solton waiting.”

Ruth kissed her father’s cheek. “No, Papa. We should not.”

They climbed into the carriage. The driver cracked the whip. She was finally on her way to the church. She felt unnervingly calm. Her destiny awaited her and all she wanted now was for the moment she was finally his. It could not come fast enough.

Afterwards, it all felt like a dream. The most beautiful dream imaginable.

Walking down the aisle of the quaint country church, on her father’s arm, with Patricia just ahead of her. The Earl smiling his encouragement, sitting in the front pew. Lady Clementine dabbing at her eyes with a lace handkerchief. And Hugh, standing at the altar beside the vicar, looking at her as if he had never seen anything so beautiful in his life.

She didn’t remember their vows, the words they had spoken to each other, to love and honour each other until their dying days. She only

remembered when he had taken her hand, slipping that ring onto her finger. His own mother's wedding ring, that the Earl had given to him, saying it was appropriate.

The wedding breakfast was like a blur, too. She knew she had barely eaten. They had sat side by side, lost in each other's eyes. Before she knew it, they were back in the carriage, heading towards the country home that Hugh had leased for the night, so they could be entirely alone.

And now, they were finally alone, about to spend their first night together, as husband and wife. Their wedding night awaited. He took her hand, kissing it, as he led her up the stairs to their chamber. They didn't speak. The air was heavy and tense with expectation. Ruth felt as if her limbs were made of lead.

In the chamber, he slowly undressed her, as if she was a precious porcelain doll. Her gown slipped to the floor, like a sigh. He unlaced her corset, his breath warm and laboured against her neck. And then, she was standing before him. She had expected to feel shy, but she didn't. She had been waiting for this moment too, had dreamt about it, longed for it. Now that it was finally here there was nothing except certainty.

She was exactly where she wanted to be. Her destiny was here, in this room, beneath his hands and his lips.

He stared at her for a long time, his expression almost painful. And then, he gathered her up in his arms, his lips finding hers. She was so lost in that kiss that she didn't even realise he was slowly undressing himself, shedding his clothes, one by one.

His hands found her breasts, the touch reverent, before sliding lower, over the flatness of her stomach, and further down, claiming her womanhood with sure, eager fingers. She shuddered with shock and delight, as a bewildering ache swept over her.

She didn't know how they got to the bed. She felt his manhood, proud and erect, brushing against her. She wasn't scared. In fact, she was rejoicing in it. The totally unexpected and delicious sensation of his naked flesh against her own, for the very first time.

His lips found a nipple, sucking feverishly. She arched her back in delight, as that ache became a fever, mottling her skin. His head dipped lower, his lips brushing over her stomach, before they found the very core of her. They felt hot and wet against her flesh, lapping at her, like a kitten at a bowl of cream.

The most incredible sensations were sweeping through her, overtaking her, rising at a rapid pace. She cried out, moaning in need. He didn't stop for an instant, pinning her hands to the mattress, as he continued. She felt like she was delirious, as if she was entering another place and time entirely. Nothing else existed except this moment.

Suddenly, the sensations reached a dramatic peak. She cried out again, as they crashed over her, tearing through her body, so incredibly sweet that it was almost agony. They barely had time to lessen before he climbed on top of her, entering her swiftly and steadily. She was so wet that he just slid into her, fitting into her like a hand into a glove.

Her eyes widened, at the first stab of pain, the strange, unknown feeling. He was inside her body. The pain was gone almost as soon as it happened. And now, it felt so good, as if he was filling her, slipping deeper into her with every forward thrust. She arched her back, encouraging him, wanting him deeper still. He was thrusting with

abandon, his face slick with sweat, and his eyes dark with desire. Pinning her to the mattress with that impassioned gaze as his body moved within her own.

Those bewilderingly sweet sensations were back, intensifying, with every thrust. She was climbing again, towards that peak. It was about to crash over her, yet again. He suddenly gripped her body tightly, crying out, an impassioned sound of fulfilment. At the same moment, it crashed over her again, in a dizzying rush. She cried out. They strained against each other for a moment, before he collapsed on top of her, panting heavily.

They lay, completely spent, in each other's arms for several minutes. They did not speak as their breathing started to slowly regulate. They were covered in sweat, as if it was the hottest of summer's days. Ruth felt dreamily languorous and tired, in a way she had never felt before.

"Are you happy, my love?" he asked eventually, turning her to face him. "I did not hurt you too much, did I?"

She slowly shook her head, a rush of pure love filling her heart. "No. It was unexpected...but it was the most incredible experience of my life." She hesitated, trying to put it into words. "I feel complete. As if the joining of your body with my own was a sacrament. As if we have become one entity."

He nodded, his eyes shining with love. "I feel exactly the same way, Ruth. I have been dreaming of this moment for so long, when you were finally mine. The joining of our flesh means that we are truly man and wife, more than the vows we exchanged in the church. I am so very glad that you feel exactly the same way that I do."

They kissed. A kiss so tender and gentle that it took her breath away.

“You know that I shall feel the same when we are old and grey,” he said intently. “The desire is only part of it, Ruth. I have never wanted a woman as much as I want you, but it is so much more than that. My love for you is as deep and as boundless as the ocean. It can never end.”

Her breath caught in her throat. “And my love for you is the same. It is like a circle, without beginning or end. I feel now that I was born loving you, even before I met you. That it truly is destiny that I met you.” She hesitated. “I can take any censure, or overcome anything, with our love.”

He smiled, trailing a finger down the side of her face. “You are my Elizabeth Woodville, and I am your king. They did not let anything stand in the way of their love, and neither shall we. We have already overcome the worst of it to be together, Ruth. The rest is easy by comparison.”

She smiled, nestling into his body, breathing in the smell of him and their lovemaking. She had never felt so safe, loved and secure in her life. She wished they could stay like this, in each other’s arms, forever. That they could block out the world beyond entirely.

He had spoken the truth. They *had* already overcome the worst of it, to get to this moment. They had flown in the face of society. They had endured separation and slander. And through all of it, he had never faltered.

The world might scorn their union forever, but it didn’t matter. As long as they had their love, they could endure anything. Exactly as

that king and his lady had done, so long ago. Their summer of love, when they had found each other, was never going to end. The future was as bright and sunny as those first beautiful days, when they had found their destiny.

Epilogue

The day dawned crisp and rosy. Ruth breathed in the frigid air, as they made their way to the coast. A tall ship awaited them. A ship that was about to carry them across the water to France. Another continent awaited them. Ten whole days of exploring Paris together, before they returned to Sandhurst Hall, to officially begin their married life.

Her stomach twisted in excitement. France. She had never been abroad before, had never really travelled anywhere. Such a life was beyond a poor girl from Cheapside. But as the wife of a viscount, anything was now possible.

She truly wouldn't have cared if they had been forced to spend their honeymoon in the back streets of London, as long as they were together, but still her heart gloried in the thought of them exploring another country. It was so incredible that she still had to pinch herself that it was true.

She gazed down at the circle of gold, on her wedding finger. The ring that meant she truly was the wife of the grand Lord Solton now. She was officially Lady Solton, the Viscountess Dalrymple. One day she would be the Countess of Montbatten. Poor Miss Ruth Middleton was gone forever.

The carriage turned down a road, and suddenly, it was open them. The ship. The *Salacia*, which would take them from Dover to Calais. From there, they would travel to Paris.

Her heart flipped over in her chest. It was so big. She had never seen anything like it in her life. As the carriage slowed, Hugh leapt out of

it, before the wheels had even stopped turning. He was obviously as eager as she was, for them to start their voyage. Ruth laughed.

“Slow down,” she said. “I am sure the ship shall wait for us!”

He smiled at her, taking her hand and assisting her down. It was windy here. She had to put her hand to her head, to stop it whipping off her bonnet. They stood there for a moment, staring at the ship. The tall masts and the white sails, billowing in the wind. He stood behind her, encircling her waist, his head resting on her shoulder as they contemplated it.

“There she is,” he said, his voice catching in the wind. “The *Salacia*. A fine ship indeed.”

Ruth nodded, staring at the wooden figurehead on the stern of the ship. It was a woman, her hair billowing in curls over her shoulders. Her bare breasts proudly jutted forward, before her torso tapered away.

“Who was Salacia?” she asked curiously, her head tilted sideways, as she contemplated the figurehead.

“Salacia was the Greek goddess of the sea,” said Hugh, smiling. “She was the consort of the god Neptune. A classic mythological figure and much revered by sailors.”

“I like her,” said Ruth, smiling as well. “I shall feel safe upon the sea under her protection.”

“As will I,” he said, taking her hand. “Come. Let us board. And then we can finally be on our way to France, under Salacia’s watchful eyes.” He gazed at her warmly. “It is like a gift awaits us, Ruth. Our honeymoon, exploring Paris together. Ten days of history, good food and wine...and then there are the nights.” His gaze grew warmer.

Ruth blushed. It had only been five days since their wedding. Five days where they had wandered the countryside by day, and lain in each other’s arms at night, exploring each other’s bodies. It barely seemed possible, but their connection had deepened further. She felt as if she had no idea where she ended, and he began any longer. As if they were truly one flesh.

And now, they had ten whole days, in a foreign city, to explore each other further. The days *and* the nights. Her body grew warm just thinking about it.

In Paris, the air was crisp and clean, as pure as a newborn’s first breath. It was autumn here as well. Tall, majestic trees lined the wide boulevards, scattering red and brown leaves like snowflakes onto the cobbled streets below.

They explored the Abbey of Saint-Germain-de-Pres, the grand cathedral of Notre Dame, and stood in awe gazing up at the Arc de Triomphe, which had begun construction in 1806. It was a whirlwind of crisp days, sitting in little cafes, while the world went by around them. It was nights of sitting in restaurants, trying new food, which Ruth had never even heard of before. It was a sensory overload, in the very best of ways.

One night, five days into their trip, as Ruth dressed for dinner, Hugh stepped into their hotel room, grinning from ear to ear.

“What is it?” she asked, as she affixed a long, diamond earring to her left lobe. “You look like the cat that just ate the cream.”

He laughed, coming over and planting a kiss upon her head. “I feel just like that cat!” He put two tickets down on the dressing table. “Look what I have managed to secure for the evening.”

She picked up the tickets, gazing down at them. Her stomach fluttered with excitement. Apparently, they were going to the opera.

“Oh,” she exclaimed, her eyes widening. “I cannot believe it! I have always dreamt of watching an opera in Paris! I never believed I would ever get the chance. That it was not possible.”

“Well, your dream has come true, my love,” he said, his eyes warm, as they rested upon her. “We are going to a real French opera.”

She sighed, unable to believe it. They both loved music so much. It was one of the things that had brought them together. And now, they would sit side by side, listening to the work of a great composer.

Her eyes filled with tears. Quite overcome, she dabbed at her eyes. She didn’t want to cry, but it was so hard not to. Hugh was so thoughtful and generous. This whole trip had been a whirlwind of new and exciting experiences. And this night at the opera was like the

crowning glory.

“What is it, my love?” he asked, frowning slightly.

“Oh, it is nothing,” she said slowly, trying to control her emotion. “It is just I still have to pinch myself that this life is real. That you are my husband, and I am experiencing such amazing things by your side. You are leading me into a whole other world, Hugh. A world that I merely glimpsed before we married.”

He smiled. “I want to lead you further into that world, Ruth. This is only the beginning. Our whole life together will be a discovery.” He paused, his smile widening. “Now, get your cloak. The opera awaits.”

She nodded. She was ready for the evening. She felt another stab of excitement. Somehow, she knew this night was going to be something she would never forget, as long as she lived.

Ruth gaped in wonder, as they entered the grand Paris opera house. It was simply called the Opera. Hugh had told her in the carriage on the way here that it had been founded in 1669, during the reign of Louis XIV, called the Sun King. It had been built when French culture had been at its zenith, before the tumbling of the monarchy and aristocracy during the revolution.

It was one of the few opera houses that remained in Paris now. The emperor Napoleon had closed most of them down, believing they were remnants of a decadent era. Ruth knew they were very lucky to be

here. For who knew if it would remain, or what was the future of opera, in such volatile times?

They took their seats. The curtain opened. Ruth was struck by the grand majesty of the production. And then, the opera began.

She had never heard such beauty in her life. It was as if she was being swept away into an entirely different world.

Hugh gripped her hand tightly. Overcome with emotion, she couldn't stop the tears trickling down her face. The singers voices were sublime. Soon, she was swept away in the story. When the curtain finally closed, she sat there, stunned. She had never seen anything like it in her life, nor experienced such rapture in music.

"Come on," whispered Hugh into her ear. "The night is not over yet, my love. There is something else I want to show you."

The carriage pulled over to the side of a wide boulevard. Ruth gazed out the window. There was a large park, with a few gaslights burning. She saw the ghostly figures of white statues in the distance.

Hand in hand, they entered it. Ruth's blood was still afire from the opera. She felt like she was walking on air, as if the music had entered her soul.

“Why are we here?” she asked, smiling, turning to him.

“Simply because the night is still young,” he said, in a quiet voice. “And because Paris is beautiful, beneath the moonlight.”

Her heart somersaulted in her chest. Her new husband was so romantic. Not only had he taken her to the opera, he was now taking her for a moonlit stroll in a Parisian park.

“You are spoiling me,” she said, trying to keep her voice from breaking with emotion.

He stopped, gazing down at her steadily. “You are worth it, Ruth. I want to show you not only how much I love and cherish you, but that you made the right choice, in fighting for our love. That the life we have together has been worth everything we had to go through to be here.”

“I already know it was worth it,” she insisted, blinking back tears again. “I have never been more certain of anything in my life.”

They kept walking, until the path stopped at a large white gazebo.

“I can still hear the music from the opera in my ears,” said Hugh, smiling down at her. “Do you?”

She nodded, smiling wistfully. “It is playing within my mind, as if I am still there.”

He nodded with satisfaction. "Then let us dance to it. Would you like to?"

She laughed. "I would like that very much."

He led her into the gazebo, where green vines coiled up the columns. He bowed formally, taking her hand. The next moment they were waltzing around the gazebo, twirling like marionettes. Ruth felt dizzy with elation. She could just see the full, pearlescent moon, high in the dark blue sky.

A night in Paris to remember, indeed.

Slowly, they stopped dancing. He took her in her arms, gazing down at her. Her heart lurched with love.

"How beautiful you are," he said, in a rough voice. "So beautiful that I simply cannot resist you for a second longer."

Ruth smiled. "Shall we return to our hotel, then?"

He shook his head. "Not yet," he whispered, taking her hand. "Come on."

They left the gazebo, giggling together. He dragged her along the

path, then veered off, so that they were deep in the gardens. Trees loomed overhead. He pushed her against one, kissing her feverishly.

Ruth moaned with excitement. It was thrilling, being here in these gardens, with him kissing her like this. They were entirely alone, and quite hidden within the gardens, but anyone could stumble upon them. It was risky ,but also very exhilarating.

His lips trailed down her neck, nipping and biting her. Suddenly, he pulled aside the bodice of her gown, seeking her breasts. She moaned again, as he suckled a nipple, causing intense waves of sensation to ripple down her spine.

His hands slid up her legs, gathering her gown, bunching it around her hips. She was already so wet; ready and eager to receive him. Her womanhood was throbbing with need. He quickly unbuttoned his britches and the next moment he was inside her, filling her completely.

She closed her eyes in ecstasy. It was always the same, when he first entered her body. The shock and the thrill of it. She wrapped her legs around him, urging him on. Vaguely, she felt the rough bark of the tree scratching her back, but she was past caring. He kept thrusting, so that she was jolting against the tree, in an agony of ecstasy.

She could tell by his laboured breath that his climax was fast approaching. Her own was building at a rapid pace, threatening to overwhelm her. Her knees were buckling. She gripped him tightly, feeling as if she was going to slide down the tree and collapse onto the ground, consumed by passion.

“My love,” he whispered, into her ear. “My love...”

He gripped her tighter, straining against her. She gave a muffled cry, as her climax crashed over her. It was so intense that she almost saw white stars. Somehow, it felt different, so much stronger, because she was standing up. Or perhaps it was simply the added thrill of making love outside, in a beautiful Parisian park, beneath the moonlight.

A night to remember, indeed.

His own pleasure peaked. He groaned, gripping her tighter still, as he poured himself into her. His grip loosened. Tenderly, he kissed her lips, pulling down her gown. She felt as weak and giddy as a newborn foal, as if she might collapse entirely.

They looked at each other for a moment, before bursting into soft laughter. He took her hand, leading her out of the gardens, towards the carriage. She giggled again, feeling like they were sharing a delectable secret. A lady and gentleman walked past them, arm in arm, stiff and staid. She had to turn her face away, for fear of laughing in their faces.

In the carriage, she rested her head against his shoulder. She was suddenly weary. So weary that she felt like she might fall asleep, here and now. It had been the most magical night of her life. She knew that whenever she heard the music from that opera, she would be transported back here, to waltzing with him in a Paris park before making love beneath the moon.

“Happy?” he whispered, taking her hand.

“Happy seems a paltry word, to describe how I feel,” she whispered. “Ecstatic. But very, very tired.”

“Rest, my love,” he whispered. “Close your eyes. My shoulder is here for you...always.”

She sighed, slowly closing her eyes. The jolt of the carriage wheels over the cobblestones didn’t even trouble her. She was drifting away, in a bubble of joy and love. She felt as if she might float out the window and into the sky, vanishing entirely.

It was worth it. Every single thing they had endured to get here. She would do it all over again. She would relive every painful moment to be here with him now. And some part of her would forever be here, dancing beneath the moonlight, as the music from the opera drifted through her mind, as sweet and fragrant as ambrosia.

THE END

*Can't get enough of Ruth and Hugh? Then make sure to check out the
[Extended Epilogue](#) to find out...*

*How will Hugh react to Ruth's concerns about them finally attending the
glamorous events of the ton?*

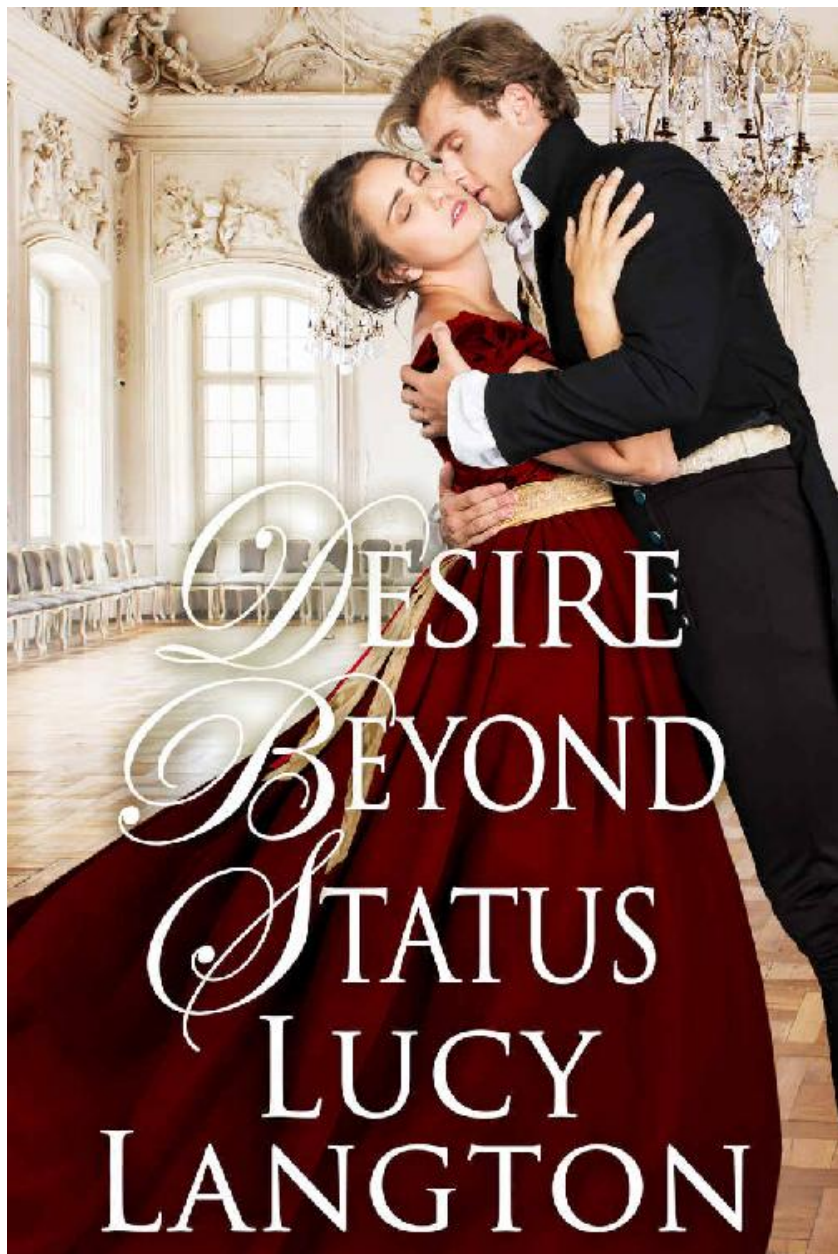
*What will Hugh's daring surprise to Ruth be and how will she and the rest
of the group react?*

*How will Ruth finally manage to enchant the high society with her talents
and kindness?*

Click the link or enter it into your browser

<http://lucylangton.com/ruth>

*(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first chapters from “**Desire Beyond Status**”, my Amazon Best-Selling novel!)*



DESIRE
BEYOND
STATUS
LUCY
LANGTON

Desire Beyond Status

Introduction

The fiery Eliza Baxter lives a peaceful life, until her aunt decides to take her to London for the Season in order to introduce her to the ton. Upon her arrival, the passionate Eliza finds herself in distress as she must endure her devious and jealous cousins, who will do anything to make her time in London unbearable. Yet, at the upcoming ball, Eliza's fateful encounter with the attractive Duke of Ellis will be her chance to gain a new ally, as they both have to get through the Season avoiding the pretentious nobles. However, Eliza's growing feelings for the Duke will soon set her heart on a fire she is unable to tame... Will she surrender to her burning desire for the enchanting Duke or will her lack of a title ruin what her heart is deeply longing for?

Hugh Conrad, the new Duke of Ellis, is a war hero and a man of duty, who struggles to accept and live up to his title after the tragic passing of his brother. When his wicked mother insists that he must find a wife, Hugh masters his past strategic skills to sneak out of his troubles. However, a ball will soon be the cause of meeting the most interesting and captivating woman he has ever seen. When Hugh lays eyes on the seductive Eliza, he will not only agree to a fraudulent courtship with her in order to mislead the suppressive relatives, but also to dive into an endless game of lust. Will Hugh overcome society's norms and fight for his flaming passion?

Even though Eliza and Hugh come together under the most unexpected circumstances, their plan soon turns into a lustful affair and when they cross the line, it is impossible to resist their tantalising romance. As their tremendous affection unfolds, so does the malice of a cunning woman who desperately schemes for their separation. With many forces conspiring against them, will Eliza and Hugh manage to pursue their unconventional attraction? In a society that revolves around titles and income, could that love and desire prevail after all?

Chapter 1

Frederica Newport. Countess of Carthope entered the Manchester townhome, being ushered into the sitting room, which was not to her taste at all. For Frederica, she considered that one's surroundings must always reflect their status in the world and their wealth. Her own home in London was upholstered in the finest fabrics and with the utmost lavishness in mind. In fact, many of the fabrics were provided to her by the man that owned the home she now stood in.

"Would you care for some tea as you wait for Mr Baxter?" a servant asked.

"That would be most agreeable," Frederica replied, toying with the pearls about her neck as she inspected the modest room.

Frederica knew that Mr Baxter was a man of wealth, and that's why the modest surroundings troubled her. He was considered the finest textile tradesman, and mothers with eligible daughters would come to his Manchester home frequently in order to deal with him directly. For Frederica, it was the first time she'd taken such a drastic step. Her expectations were not met in terms of Mr Baxter's interior design.

Seating herself upon a stiff sofa, Frederica straightened her blue silk dress and green sash. Her own gown was made from Mr Baxter's textiles, and alas, Frederica bemoaned the fact that she didn't know how to afford another.

"Tea, Lady Carthope," the servant said, returning with the tray.

“Set it over there,” Frederica commanded, as though it were her own home. Of course, the Baxters were impossibly beneath her since she was married to an earl. Still, of late, the earl’s gambling was making it so that, one day, she might not be able to look down upon anyone.

“My lady,” Mr Baxter said, entering wearing a neat brown coat. He was a man that was very affable in appearance, with dark brown hair and eyes. Frederica had to admit that he was handsome, and she could see why her sister once found an appeal. But now, her sister was dead, and Frederica could finally admit to herself that Mr Baxter was not only a merchant; he was a brother-in-law that she always denied.

“Mr Baxter, I’m pleased that you chose to meet with me on such short notice.”

“I must admit that I was surprised.”

“And why should you be?”

Mr Baxter elevated his brow, challenging Frederica’s question. “Lady Carthope, you know that we have not spoken in some time.”

“And whose fault was that, I dare say?”

Yes, Frederica was positively at odds with her late sister. Only her death would change that, for Frederica felt some small measure of penitence now.

Mr Baxter remained composed and seated himself, folding his hands in his lap. "You and Margaret were at odds."

"With all due respect, Mr Baxter, my sister could be... unkind. Alas, she had reservations about my marriage." What Frederica didn't wish to say was that her sister was jealous all the while

"She never expressed such reservations to me."

"I'm sure that she didn't! Margaret was a very stubborn and quiet person."

"Lady Carthope, don't you think that's perhaps insensitive at this time?"

Frederica frowned. "What was insensitive was my sister... banishing me in my time of need?"

Mr Baxter fell silent before replying, "Perhaps I can serve you this cup of tea."

"Most agreeable."

Frederica inspected Mr Baxter as he poured the tea. How could he remain so composed when the situation between she and Margaret was so dire? Did Mr Baxter not know of how Frederica had been so horribly wronged? She was so incensed by Margaret's conduct—the

memory of it alone making Frederica need her smelling salts—that she hadn’t even bothered to express a desire to meet Margaret’s daughter, who resided in that very home.

Mr Baxter handed Frederica the tea, and she was surprised that she took it with a shaky hand. Yes, all of this was playing upon her nerves so terribly. She was so utterly cross with the Earl of Carthope for the position that he’d put her in. Why was the whole world conspiring against her?

“Your furnishings are very plain,” Frederica remarked, taking a sip of her tea.

“I prefer it that way. I find that simple surroundings help to calm the mind.”

“I cannot agree in the slightest,” Frederica protested. “I think that one’s surroundings must create interest, amusement, and rapture. At least, that’s how my own furnishings were designed.”

Mr Baxter returned to his seat in silence, gazing out the window. “Lady Carthope, I can’t help but ask what has brought you here today.”

“I’ve come to make amends, can’t you see?”

“It seems to me that you’ve come for a reckoning. Perhaps you should have done that when my wife was still alive.”

Oh, none of it was going to plan. Frederica had expected Mr Baxter to be penitent, confirming her belief that she'd been wronged by Margaret. Obviously, such penitence was not written on his brow, and Frederica would have to pivot.

“Mr Baxter, I’m sure that you’re aware of my situation.” Frederica’s voice was hushed.

Mr Baxter cleared his throat, becoming visibly uncomfortable. “I think that I know what you’re referring to.”

“Yes, news has spread to Manchester! Everyone in town already knows. I fear that the earl has lost all control, and now I’m at my wits’ end.”

“Lady Carthope, how is it that I may be of assistance, for I sense that my assistance is required,” Mr Baxter replied wearily.

Frederica, now indignant, jutted her chin into the air and spoke through her teeth. “It’s of the utmost importance now that my daughters marry, and this very season. Latica and Henrietta have laid dormant for too long. They’re remarkably pretty and accomplished girls, and I’m sure that they can be a success.”

“With the right apparel,” Mr Baxter interjected. “I’ve heard this before. In fact, I deal with these situations on a daily basis.”

Frederica brightened, displaying a smile. “Yes, I knew that I could count on you. The fabrics that you secure are of the utmost quality.

Everyone in London knows it.”

“Our silk is from France,” Mr Baxter said with no small measure of pride. “And we have new textiles from the Orient. I take great pains to only secure the best.”

Frederica set down her teacup in excitement. “Yes, I know this to be true! Oh, I know that funds are not as they should be right now, but I want only the best for my girls. They will be the sparkling diamonds of the London season! I’m sure of it.”

Mr Baxter remarked, “My lady, do you not think it troublesome that you put so much hope in your girls, in light of your present circumstances? I myself have a daughter, and I understand that that’s... a bit trying.”

Frederica was positively offended. How dare Mr Baxter tell her how to be a good mother. “Successful marriages will make Latica and Henrietta happy. They’ve expressed as much. Oh, Mr Baxter, I know that you’re only a textile merchant, so it must be difficult to understand the hearts and minds of society girls.”

Frederica thought that he might be offended by her statement, but instead, Mr Baxter remained unnervingly calm. “I suppose that we have different perspectives on the matter. My daughter has expressed a desire to come out into society this year, but it will be a far different situation than what your girls might encounter.”

Frederica became intrigued. “She... wishes to come out?”

“Indeed. Eliza is keen upon marriage, but only if she finds the right person. I have expressed to her that there is no rush, despite the fact that she’s twenty years of age.”

Frederica was positively agog! Why Eliza Baxter was nearly a spinster at that age. She retorted under veiled lids, “I suppose at her age she can make such a decision, but I’m horrified that she hadn’t made it sooner.”

“I believe that the death of my wife stalled the matter. Her interest waned as she wore her mourning clothes.”

For a brief moment, Frederica felt compunction. She herself did not wear black after her sister’s death for reasons that were all too clear. Yet still, she felt for Eliza Baxter. Frederica couldn’t imagine the difficulty of losing a mother, even if it was someone as incorrigible as her sister.

“Well... if she ever needs some motherly advice, I’m sure that I can be of assistance. Particularly if I could enjoy some sort of *discount* on the items I’m purchasing.” To Frederica’s mind, this was not a low blow in the slightest. This was ingenuity and resourcefulness.

“I don’t think that that will be necessary, Lady Carthope. My daughter is perfectly capable of navigating these waters on her own.”

“I highly disagree.” Frederica pulled her shoulders back in pride. “A young girl needs guidance when it comes to these affairs. Surely, she has a governess to chaperone her.”

“Indeed.”

“Well, that is not enough! A girl needs her mother by her side when fielding the advances of men. I would have it no other way.”

Indeed, Frederica’s mother had been a saint when it came time for her to marry. She was hawk-eyed and perspicacious, making it apparent that no one but a man of the highest quality could marry Frederica. If only her mother could see her now in dire straits!

Frederica’s mother had turned a blind eye when Margaret married Mr Baxter. Of course, Margaret married beneath herself, and she had claimed that it was for love. What a horrible mistake her sister had made.

“I thank you again for your offer, my lady,” Mr Baxter went on. “But Eliza is not in need of your assistance. I think that we can keep her out of these affairs.”

It was all so offensive, but Frederica would endure for the sake of her own daughters. It occurred to Frederica that she had no idea what Eliza Baxter looked like. She never considered Margaret a great beauty, but Mr Baxter was handsome. She feared that Eliza might have male features because of that. Perhaps that was what also kept her from marrying till such a late age?

Getting down to business, Frederica began to explain the fabrics that she required. Mr Baxter excused himself and returned with items that fit her description, and all at once, Frederica was very pleased. The silks that he displayed shone like glassy water, and the colours were understated and mute in just the way that she preferred.

“I must say, Mr Baxter, you have a keen eye for textiles.”

“Textiles are my life. I am very skilled in my trade.”

“Oh, I would very much agree! This particular shade of green will suit Henrietta. She has my light colouring, so this hue shan’t be overpowering.”

Cocking her head to the side, Frederica considered how lucky it had been that she was the lighter sister. Where Margaret had dark hair and eyes, Frederica had sandy blonde hair and soft hazel eyes. It was merely fortune that graced her with these gifts.

“And the sum?” Frederica asked.

Mr Baxter pulled out a piece of paper and wrote upon it, handing her the note. Frederica froze when she beheld the sum.

“I did administer a bit of a discount,” Mr Baxter said in a businesslike fashion.

“But surely, this can’t be correct.”

“It is.”

Frederica gazed up at him in disgust. "I... I will find a way," Frederica replied with determination. "I know that my husband has savings."

"That is good to hear." Mr Baxter returned to his chair with a pleasant smile upon his lips, which Frederica didn't care for in the slightest.

Just then, the door to the sitting room opened, and a girl entered, wearing a simple white muslin gown. Frederica's jaw dropped open as she inspected the girl. Yes, that was Eliza Baxter standing before her.

"Father, it's time for my walk."

"Very well, Eliza," Mr Baxter replied. "But first, allow me to introduce you to your aunt. This is Lady Carthope."

Both Frederica and Eliza gazed at one another. Oh, but it was dreadful! Eliza was far more beautiful than Frederica had expected.

"Lady Carthope has offered to be your chaperone for the season, Eliza," Mr Baxter continued.

Eliza appeared shocked, then a smile rose upon her lips. "I... I would be grateful."

Frederica's eyebrows elevated. Now, she was beginning to regret making the offer.

Chapter 2

Latica Newport sat in the parlour of her family's London home, feeling no small measure of trepidation. Why was it so? Usually, Latica loved coming to London to see all the unique sights and enjoy in the splendour. This season, Latica knew that everything would have to change.

Her mother had said in no uncertain terms that Latica was to marry this season, as would her older sister, Henrietta. Why was this announcement so abrupt, and why did Latica wish that she could wait just one more year? Oh, she knew of her father's gambling and the dwindling Carthope funds. In fact, everyone knew about it. That was no doubt the reason why her mother was now insisting upon a hurried marriage. What's more, Frederica had her sights set on Hugh Conrad, the illustrious Duke of Ellis.

"Latica, where are you?" she heard her mother's voice call out.

"In the parlour, mother."

Very soon, Frederica arrived with Henrietta by her side. Frederica clasped her hands together. "I have such marvellous news!"

"What is it?" Latica asked, apprehensive for what her mother might say.

"I have just come from the dressmaker. Everything has been arranged."

“Is that where you’ve been all afternoon?” Latica had to ask, considering that her mother was always disappearing without announcement.

“Indeed. Oh, Latica, you’ll wear such finery this season.” Frederica stopped and placed her hands upon her hips. “Why do you not appear excited.”

Henrietta said, “Because she’d much rather read her silly books.” As Henrietta spoke, she inspected herself in the mirror. She was similar in colouring to Latica, but that was where the similarities ended. Henrietta was a far different specimen. “There are several gowns that I admire, and I dare say that I should be able to select the best ones first, seeing as I’m the eldest.”

“Oh, Henrietta, hush,” Frederica scolded, walking over and seating herself on a plush chair. “You shall both have marvellous gowns.” Frederica, seemingly winded, fanned herself with her hand.

Henrietta mused, “What do you suppose the Duke of Ellis’ favourite colour is? If I knew, I’d wear that colour all season long!”

“Don’t be so gauche, daughter. That would be all too obvious.”

Just then, several servants entered the parlour, carrying rather large white boxes. Frederica began to coo once more, and so did Henrietta, but Latica remained seated.

“Here we are!” Henrietta said, massaging her hands together as though staring at a tasty meal. “My heart is pounding with anticipation.”

“Latica, what are you doing seated there?” Frederica asked. “Come here at once.”

Latica begrudgingly got up from her seat to join her mother and sister. They were both flushed with excitement as the lids to the boxes were removed, and they peered down within. Henrietta was the first to reach down and apprehend a green gown, which she held up to her form.

“Oh, this is a triumph.”

“I like that one, as well,” Latica remarked, delighting in the soft green colour.

Henrietta immediately scoffed. “This is far more suitable for me. Consider how much lighter my skin is, Latica. It’s best that I wear this to the very first ball. I know that the Duke of Ellis will find it fetching.”

Frederica concurred. “Oh, you will turn his head for sure. I wouldn’t be surprised if he asks you to dance twice!”

“Nor would I,” Henrietta agreed.

Witnessing all of this, Latica felt invisible and wondered if it was all for the best. Her sister had been right; she wished to rather read her book in silence and not have to contend with the matter at hand. But sadly, this would be her life for the next several months, and she'd merely have to suffer through it.

"Where is father?" Latica asked.

Frederica became visibly uncomfortable. "Tending to business affairs, I suppose."

Latica felt her stomach flip. She knew what that insinuated, and it filled her with shame. Why had her father changed so over the years? And what's more, how could her mother possibly afford the rich apparel in those boxes.

"This is fitting," Henrietta said, taking out a puce gown and holding it up to Latica. "I think this is a good colour on you."

Latica crinkled her nose, not thinking the colour flattering in the slightest. "I'm unsure."

"Your sister speaks the truth," Frederica insisted. "Do try it on at once. It will look so lovely on your form."

Before Latica could do so, a steward entered the room and whispered something softly into Frederica's ear. She coloured once more and exhaled, turning to her daughters with a worried expression.

“Girls, there’s something that I must tell you.”

“The Duke of Ellis is coming for supper?” Henrietta asked.

Frederica frowned. “Don’t be silly, daughter. That would be unsuitable. We must wait for the duke to invite us to his home. Otherwise, it shall be a scandal.”

Henrietta sulked. “I have no patience in these matters.”

Frederica went on, “No, there’s someone very important that I wish for you to meet, and she has arrived just now. I have told you of... my dreadful sister?”

“Indeed,” Henrietta replied.

“Well, what I have not told you is that Margaret had a daughter. And... she’s the daughter to Mr Baxter, the textile salesman who sold me the remarkable fabric for these gowns. Now, there was a bit of a deal struck up and... Eliza Baxter shall be joining us for the season.”

Henrietta was agog, and even Latica’s jaw dropped open. How unlike her mother to make such an arrangement.

“Mother, how on earth did you think that that was a good idea?” Henrietta asked, sulking.

“Please understand, we must be kind in these matters. Once all was said and done, I was able to secure a minor discount which secured you these rich fabrics. Oh, I’m sure it won’t be all that dreadful! I have met the girl on one occasion, and she seems rather... kind.”

From Frederica’s tone, Latica could tell that there was something not being said. It was apparent that Henrietta was furious, but for a brief moment, Latica considered that she might be meeting a new friend.

The whole business surrounding her mother’s sister was something of a mystery. Latica had never had the chance to meet her, but her mother would tell horrid stories about what a pain she was. Considering the natural drama that her mother was prone to, Latica wondered if there was a great deal that went unsaid.

“For my part, I’m excited to meet her,” Latica offered, thinking it best to hold the situation in the proper light.

“Latica, what are you saying? Do you want someone else to vie for the Duke of Ellis’ attentions?” Henrietta asked. “Why, I’m told that his mother wants him married off quickly. We must be cunning in our pursuit of him.”

It was rather ghastly what Henrietta had just said. Latica almost wished that her sister would marry Hugh Conrad quickly so that the whole matter might be over and done with! That way, maybe Latica would have a bit of peace, and it could buy her some time before her own marriage. But considering her own mother’s haste, this was perhaps not to be the case.

“Girls, girls,” Frederica scolded. “I’ll have no more talk of this. She is a commoner, after all. There’s no chance that she will win the duke over... ” Again, Frederica faltered. “But let’s not talk of this any longer. I’ll have the servants bring tea so that we might sit down and meet Eliza in a proper fashion. I want each of you to be cordial.”

Henrietta protested, “But, mother, will she be sharing our gowns?”

“Heavens, no,” Frederica assured her. “Eliza is responsible for her own apparel. You needn’t worry yourself about that.”

“But where will she sleep?”

“In the guest room, you silly goose.”

Henrietta crossed her arms in front of her chest. “Well, I dare say, I hope that she shall be on the first floor instead of the third. I enjoy my peace and quiet in my chambers.”

Latica had the mind to roll her eyes. Her sister was rather a nuisance, and she already felt sorry for poor Eliza for what she would probably endure.

“Now then, let’s have these boxes removed.” Frederica clapped her hands together to order the servants to do so. “And let us be seated. Arrange yourselves in such a way that you look open and inviting, and you,” she said to a servant, “bring in the tea at once.”

The servant quickly fled from the room, and the girls sat on a sofa side by side. Henrietta straightened out her skirts and coiffed her hair, but Latica merely sat there blankly, wondering how on earth she was supposed to look pleasing and inviting as her mother instructed. The tea service was brought in, and each girl received a cup, then the butler entered.

“Would now be a suitable time, my lady?” he asked.

“Yes, do send her in.”

There was silence in the parlour as the three of them waited. Then, the door was opened once more, and the butler announced, “Miss Eliza Baxter.”

Latica, entirely in awe, turned to her sister, who coloured a dark crimson. Frederica sat nervously, fiddling with her hands before saying, “We’re so happy to have you in our home, Eliza. These are my daughters, Henrietta and Latica.”

Both girls sat dumb, seemingly unable to speak because Latica considered that Eliza Baxter might just be the most beautiful girl she’d ever beheld. How could her mother agree to chaperone a young lady that was considerably more beautiful than either Henrietta or herself?

“I’m so very pleased to meet you,” Eliza said, elegant in bearing but visibly nervous.

“Speak, my girls,” Frederica instructed.

Latica cleared her throat and spoke. "We're... happy to meet you, Eliza."

"You must be Latica."

"Indeed."

"Yes, wonderful to meet you. I do hope that we can be friends."

From her affable nature, Latica sensed that Eliza was a girl that could perhaps be trusted. Yet, from the scowl on Henrietta's face, she was under the impression that her sister did not feel the same.

"Charming," Henrietta said flatly.

"Oh, Henrietta, I've heard so much about you," Eliza went on. "Your gown... is so lovely."

Henrietta's response was flat again. "I thank you."

"Please, Eliza, be seated. Take a cup of tea." Frederica motioned for the servants to serve Eliza, and as she sat, Latica observed her. Eliza had stunning brown hair and eyes, and her figure was ever so perfect. She gazed down at her own imperfect figure and wondered how it was that Eliza Baxter accomplished such a small waste. Oh, it was so

vexing, but Latica must do her best to be kind.

Once Eliza was given her tea, the conversation faltered for some time, as Henrietta still didn't wish to speak, Latica didn't know what to say, and Eliza's nerves would not quell.

"What is your favourite thing to do in town?" Eliza asked.

Latica could finally think of something to say. "I enjoy going for strolls in the park. It's ever so lovely this time of year."

Eliza sat up in her seat with enthusiasm. "Oh, I very much love going for strolls as well. I should love to do so often."

"And how soon do you wish to be married?" Henrietta asked quickly, her brow elevated.

Eliza was made uncomfortable by this and answered slowly, "I suppose that there is no rush. But if I could find a suitable partner this season, I'd be very much pleased."

"Hmf," Henrietta uttered.

Chapter 3

Oh, Eliza feared that she'd never calm down. It was a mixture of excitement and trepidation. Never had she been a part of the *ton* before, and from the finery that the Newport sisters wore, she was sure that it was going to be difficult to fit in. Yet still, she had some very comely gowns thanks to her father's business, and she could feel proud in the lavender dress that she wore that afternoon.

"Whatever did you do in Manchester?" Lady Carthope asked.

"There were plenty of things to do, I assure you." Eliza set down her tea, which was remarkably rich in flavour. "I spent a great deal of time on my studies but also luxuriated in long walks and rides. I've become adept at riding horses."

Lady Carthope quipped, "That's a tad masculine, don't you think?"

Eliza reddened. Her father always encouraged her to engage in sport, and she saw nothing unsuitable about it. "On the contrary. I ride side-saddle, of course. But I greatly benefit from the exertion."

"I never allow my girls to ride. Oh, when I see young ladies riding in Hyde Park, I become positively aghast."

"Ladies ride in Hyde Park?" Eliza asked in wonder.

“Indeed. If you ask me, they only receive the attention of men because of their boldness. But there’s nothing decidedly feminine about the practice. Let the men have their horses and let the ladies learn how to play the piano. This is the way it has always been done.” Lady Carthope sipped her tea with a decidedly pompous air.

Was Eliza to feel like an outcast for the entirety of her time in London? She almost assumed that that would be the case. But it was important to her to find a husband. Not because she was in need of funds, but because Eliza wished to fall in love! Her mother and father had been very much in love, which gave Eliza a good model for what she hoped to find in her life.

A bit of silence followed, and Eliza was left to wonder what might happen next. Should she ask questions about the season and the first ball they would attend? There were so many things that she wanted to know, but Eliza didn’t want to come off as nosy or imposing.

“Well then,” Lady Carthope said elegantly, rising from her seat, “Let us get you situated in your room so that you might change out of your travelling clothes.”

Eliza didn’t have the heart to mention that she wasn’t wearing travelling clothes, nor did she have anything more impressive to change into for the late afternoon.

“Yes, I should like to see my room.”

“A servant shall escort you. Henrietta, Latica, why don’t you go with Eliza to help her situate herself.”

“I fear that I have plans for this afternoon,” Henrietta replied, inspecting her nails. “But if Latica is unengaged, I’m sure she’d be willing.”

Eliza turned to Latica, who was the shorter and fairer of the two sisters, albeit quiet. Latica said, “Yes, I can help Eliza to settle and show her around the house.”

“That is most welcoming of you, Latica,” Lady Carthope replied. “Good afternoon,” she added, excusing herself.

Henrietta got up silently from her chair and left the room, glaring at Eliza all the while. Eliza turned to Latica for reassurance, who smiled warmly. “Come this way,” Latica said, exiting the parlour.

As Eliza followed Latica, she was in awe of her surroundings. Everything was so luxurious and a bit ostentatious, something that Eliza was not used to in the slightest. Her father always kept their home very simple and clean, and Eliza wondered if she might prefer that kind of atmosphere.

There was something of a tour, with Latica showing Eliza the breakfast and tea rooms, the dining room, the stairs to the servants’ quarters, and all the rest. Each room seemed to be more lavish than the last, but there was an eerie silence in the home that Eliza couldn’t quite understand.

“And this is your room,” Latica said, motioning with her hand. “It’s very quaint.”

Stepping inside, Eliza considered that there was nothing quaint about it. Her room seemed just as lavish as the rest. She had her own water closet with a porcelain tub for bathing! Eliza couldn't believe her eyes.

"Have you always lived like this?"

Latica laughed. "Of course, we have. I know no other life. If you ask me, I feel that our townhome is more modest than the country estate."

"How inspiring."

"Yes, you will find yourself comfortable here. We receive guests within an hour's time, and once that is done, we make preparations for supper."

"What kinds of preparations?" Eliza asked, watching as a servant brought her trunk into the room and opened it.

"Dressing for supper, of course. Mother insists that it be quite formal. There are often guests."

"How very intimidating," Eliza replied candidly.

Latica smiled warmly yet again, giving Eliza reassurance. "Don't fear. You'll adjust rather quickly, I'm sure."

Just then, an old, diminutive woman stepped into the room wearing a starched apron.

“Is this your grandmother?” Eliza asked innocently.

“Heavens, no! This is your abigail. She’ll assist you with dressing and undressing.”

“I’m sure that’s unnecessary.”

“Of course, it’s necessary. I don’t know what I’d do without mine.”

The older woman bowed and said, “Pleased to serve you, my lady.”

Eliza put up a hand. “I’m not a lady. I’m merely a commoner.”

The abigail lifted her brow. “Very well... Miss.”

Whilst the older lady unpacked Eliza’s trunk, Latica bid them sit, and once seated, she said, “I’m so happy that you enjoy walking in the park. It’s one of my favourite pastimes.”

“That’s wonderful to hear. I do enjoy the exercise. My father always encouraged it.”

Latica gazed at her quizzically. "How very odd. My mother is not pleased with it when I walk too far."

"And now, that seems odd to me!"

"Do you know how to dance? We'll attend plenty of balls and dances."

Eliza gazed down bashfully. "I know how to dance, but I very much fear that I might step on a gentleman's foot."

Latica laughed and brought a hand over her mouth. "I have done that in the past. I promise you that most men are very forgiving."

All at once, Eliza felt a strong affinity towards Latica. It was ever so inviting, considering that Henrietta didn't seem to care for her at all, and the countess was remarkably cold, although Eliza was grateful for her hospitality.

"And... your father?"

Latica reddened. "You have heard of him."

"I have."

“It’s a dreadful situation. My mother doesn’t talk of it often, but I know that it’s why she’s intent upon marrying me off this season. He keeps to himself much. There are some days when I only see father at supper and some days where he’s not at supper at all. He always takes breakfast and tea in his study.”

“I’m sorry.” Eliza’s tone was warm and empathetic. “I really can’t imagine.”

“It sounds as though your father is a very industrious and hard-working man. That must be rather inspiring.”

“Oh, but it is. I love to watch him work. I frequently travelled with him to France to see where the textiles are made. He’s so determined in what he does, and I wish to be the same.”

“In business?” Latica asked quizzically.

“Well, I suppose that I can’t do that, but there are some ladies that undertake it. No, I just wish to be as focused as he is on something. He made a whole life for himself from nothing, and I find him immensely inspiring.”

“As do I,” Latica said, then she abruptly got up from her seat. “May I inspect your gowns?”

Eliza nearly cringed. Was this normal amongst society ladies? “If you wish.”

Latica opened the bureau, where the abigail had already hung the gowns. She frowned to herself ever so slightly. "These are rather... charming."

"You needn't be kind. My father has very simple tastes, and he prefers me in these gowns."

Latica turned to her. "And what do you prefer?"

Eliza shrugged. "I'm unsure. Oh, I do admire your lavish gowns. They're so shiny and fine! I should like to wear one similar one of these days."

"I'll allow you to borrow some of mine," Latica said in hushed tones. "But I fear that I'm far more dumpy than you."

"You are not!" Eliza protested. "Perhaps you're just too hard on yourself."

Latica looked down at her figure, continuously frowning. "I've always wanted to have the perfect trim waste, as you do. When you borrow my gowns, we'll have to stitch them in a bit."

"Only a slight bit," Eliza assured her.

The girls carried on for some time, relaxing and discussing gowns and finery. The tenor seemed to shift when Latica remarked, "You really

should find a husband as quickly as possible.”

“Oh?”

“Why, yes! Being untitled, I would imagine that it’s going to be considerably difficult. No man can ask for your hand without a bit of shame. Oh, but you shouldn’t let this trouble you. Put your best foot forward, borrow my gowns, and learn how to behave like a lady.”

Although the words were cutting, Latica spoke all of this affably. Eliza didn’t blame her for saying all that she had because it was what she expected. Yet still, Latica’s words filled her with a drop of shame, and Eliza was left to wonder if it was silly for her to come to London in the first place.

“I will do my best,” she assured Latica. “I know that I have much to offer, and I’m searching for a man of keen intelligence who can see beyond titles and such.”

Latica placed a friendly hand upon Eliza’s shoulder. “You’ll find it. I’m quite sure.”

Just then, a footman entered carrying a letter. “This is for you, Miss Baxter.”

“For me?” Eliza was in shock. Whoever could have sent her a letter? But just as soon as she saw Dinah Adair’s seal, Eliza blushed with pride. “Oh, thank you!”

“Who is it from?” Latica inquired.

“My very best friend, Lady Dinah Adair. She lives in London and will also be a part of the season.”

“You’re friends with Lady Dinah? My word, but she is a social phenomenon.”

“Yes, she’s quite outspoken and social, but that’s entirely what I love about her.” Eliza gazed down at the letter in pride.

“I’ll leave you. Come downstairs in a half hour’s time for tea. You know the place.”

“Thank you for answering all of my questions, Latica, and for being so kind.”

“The pleasure is all mine.”

With that, Eliza was left alone to read Dinah’s letter, which she opened with relish.

Dearest Eliza,

I can’t believe that we’ll both be coming out this year, and I’m so happy

that you're in town. Promise me that we'll spend as much time together as possible. In fact, I think that a long stroll tomorrow morning sounds ideal. Respond at your convenience.

Yours,

Dinah

Eliza pressed the letter against her heart. How remarkable it was that her best friend was the daughter of an earl. Dinah always exhibited an open mind and kind heart, and that's why she accepted the friendship of the daughter of a tradesman.

Eliza was already anticipating the following morning because she and Dinah always had so much to talk about. But the next task at hand was to prepare herself for tea. Should she change her apparel? She thought so, considering how the countess assumed her gown to be travelling attire.

Walking to the bureau, Eliza inspected her gowns and frowned to herself. No, they were not very flashy or impressive. She would definitely need to take Latica up on her offer.

Chapter 4

“Dinah, I can’t banish it from my mind,” Eliza said as she walked, carrying a parasol in her hand and breathing in the London air.

“It shouldn’t matter what she said. The Newport sisters are notoriously rude.”

“I wouldn’t say that Lady Latica was rude in the slightest. In fact, she was the only one that showed me any kindness. And what she said was true. I shall be an outcast when I attend my first ball this evening.”

As they strolled the London streets, Eliza couldn’t help but admire the finery that Dinah wore. Her deep blue gown was accented by pearls, and she wore little sapphires in her ears which sparkled in the shining sun.

“You’re going to be wonderful, Eliza, I promise you. What with your beauty and intelligence. No one shall judge you for not having a title.”

Eliza frowned to herself. She was unsure of whether or not to believe Dinah, for she knew how society worked. Dinah had taught her much in their years of friendship. Eliza was ever so grateful to have a society lady as a friend. All her life, Dinah was the only one that she could confide in, and that very afternoon, this was proving to be the case once more.

“Do you know, my father is actually keen on my marrying someone

with some standing in society,” Eliza went on.

“Your father is a good man and wants the best for you.”

“But we enjoy spending time together very much. I always assumed that he never wished to see me go.”

Dinah stopped and turned towards Eliza, placing a friendly hand on her shoulder. “He can not wish to see you go but still long for your happiness. You’ve said yourself that finding a man to love would make you happy. By coming to London, you’re making your wishes come true.”

“Yes, that is true.” Eliza continued to stroll. “Oh, wouldn’t it be so marvellous to be in love? To live with someone that you truly long to be with... someone who is perhaps handsome and kind.”

“And to sleep in the same bed!” Dinah said with a flourish.

“Oh, Dinah, hush! Someone might hear you.”

“But it’s the truth, is it not? There are certain kinds of affections that one may enjoy whilst married.” Dinah elevated her brow and looked all around her. “And there are so many handsome men in London. So many fascinating characters. Just as you long to be wed, so do I.”

“But promise that we’ll remain the best of friends after we’ve both found husbands.”

“There’s nothing that can come between our friendship.”

As they continued to walk along contentedly, Eliza couldn’t help but wonder what had changed within her recently. Before, she felt like all that she needed were her personal pursuits and her father. Then it came crashing over her like a wave; Eliza desired the companionship of a gentleman for many, many reasons.

“Such a glorious day,” Dinah said.

Eliza took Dinah’s hand. “Just imagine how many more glorious days we get to spend with one another. It helps me hold onto hope that all of my days won’t be in the company of Lady Frederica or Lady Henrietta.”

“Are they really so terrible?”

Eliza fell into contemplation. Truly, they had made her feel most unwelcome, and Eliza anticipated that that was not to change. But perhaps she could win them over in some way. What’s more, if she could do so, perhaps this would amend any ill feelings that remained concerning her mother.

“What I don’t understand is why the countess was so opposed to my mother. She was such a sweet woman. Surely, she didn’t marry as well as the countess did, but was that any reason to despise her?”

Dinah crinkled her nose. “Were the feelings between them truly so ill?”

“My mother never said anything poor regarding Lady Frederica. She merely told me that her sister was distant and wanted nothing to do with her. Can you imagine having such a rift between one’s only sibling?”

“I must admit that I cannot. But these things are mysterious, are they not?”

“I suppose.”

Eliza fell silent, momentarily missing her mother desperately. Had Margaret Baxter still been alive, she would be Eliza’s chaperone whilst she navigated society in London. What a relief that would be, for Eliza was unsure whether or not Lady Frederica wished to be her chaperone at all.

One of these days, she’d be candid with her aunt, asking her why it was that she treated Margaret Baxter so poorly. Perhaps Eliza could heal these wounds with her presence. More importantly, perhaps she could find a husband that would help to heal Eliza’s, own heart.

“Do you know the time?” Eliza asked, remembering that she needed to prepare for the ball that night.

“I fear that I don’t.”

“It would be so terrible to be late. But then again, when the sunshine is out in this way, I can’t help but bask in it!”

They continued to walk along, and Eliza tried to gauge the time by the placement of the sun. She concluded that she might be a tad late, but receiving comfort from Dinah’s presence was essential. What’s more, there were so many handsome men out and about that afternoon, and Eliza received several glances which brought colour to her cheeks. Yes, she very much enjoyed the prospect of being admired and gazed upon. Eliza was told in the past that she was beautiful, but never had she received so much attention from the male sex.

Once their walk was concluded, the two girls embraced one another. “You’re going to have a marvellous time,” Dinah informed her.

“I do hope so.”

“Remember to keep your chin up and don’t be afraid to share your intelligence. Men find it quite attractive.”

“Is that so?” Eliza asked.

“Oh yes. They merely never admit to it!”

Leaving Dinah and approaching the Newport home, Eliza felt dread in her breast. The evening ahead seemed daunting, and Eliza greatly wished that Latica remembered her offer to lend Eliza a gown.

Knocking upon the door, a footman quickly answered, and Eliza was ushered inside, noting the scowl upon the footman's face. "Her ladyship has been asking for you."

"Is that so?" Eliza replied.

"Indeed, Miss. She remarked that you're late."

A shudder of fear coursed through her as Eliza realized that this might be true. She got so carried away walking and talking with Dinah, and now, she was perhaps going to have to receive punishment.

"Eliza, where have you been?" the countess reprimanded.

"I was on a stroll with my very best friend."

"Don't you realize how important this evening is?" The countess was seated on a sofa in the parlour, Henrietta beside her looking none too pleased.

"I do realize."

"Then you must show it with your behaviour."

"The stroll was innocent enough. Lady Dinah was giving me advice for

the ball this evening.”

“And what of my advice? Had you been seated in this parlour all afternoon, I could have informed you of everything.”

Eliza stood silently, not knowing what else to say and unsure how to mend the inevitable tension between herself and her aunt. Finally, Henrietta said, “There’s no use in carrying on as though there’s nothing to fear. You haven’t a title, Eliza. You’re going to have to take great pains to make something of yourself.”

But Eliza did feel a great deal of fear! Couldn’t Henrietta see that? “I shall endeavour to do my best.”

The countess continued to frown. “Why don’t you go upstairs so that you can be readied by your abigail. Latica is already making preparations.”

“Yes, my lady.”

“And be sure that you choose the proper gown. Once you’ve done so, send a footman to fetch me so that I might inspect it.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Eliza walked up to her room with her shoulders slumped. Yes, the countess would be inspecting her every move from now on. It was important to please her, for Eliza did not care to be reprimanded on a

daily basis.

Upon entering her room, Eliza discovered that there was a gown already laid out on the bed. “My word,” Eliza said in wonder, bringing her hands to her cheeks.

“This is what Lady Latica suggested.”

“It’s marvellous.” Eliza approached the stunning emerald gown, delighting in the rich colour. “Do you not think that the hue speaks too loudly?”

The old woman shook her head. “The first ball of the season always calls for deep colours, Miss. I’ve learned this over the years. Of course, the fashions are always changing. But the first ball is more important, so I must take pains to set your hair just right.”

“I’m most grateful to you.”

With the preparations underway, Eliza sipped camomile tea whilst the old lady pinned her curls. Eliza’s hair was soft and smooth, making it rather effortless to set well, although Eliza herself rarely took pains to do it.

What was amusing at first seemed to continue for hours. Every aspect of Eliza’s person was inspected and perfected. Once the green gown was placed upon her, the abigail needed to hem the waist, just as Latica had thought.

Just as Eliza had this thought, Latica entered, wearing an exquisite purple gown. “Latica, you look so beautiful.”

“And look at you, Eliza! The gown is ravishing on you.”

Eliza clutched herself. “I’m so grateful that you lent me the gown. I have nothing in such a bold colour.”

“The green works wonderfully with your brown hair. I think that you’re going to make quite the impression.”

The two girls stood before the mirror, admiring one another. A wave of gratitude came over Eliza as she realized that Latica was indeed a kind soul, despite what she’d said the previous day. It was good to have at least one woman on her side in the Newport household.

“Latica, I’m displeased with your hair,” the countess remarked, abruptly entering the room.

Latica brought a hand to her curls. “What is wrong with it?”

“These are far too tight. They must fall loosely around your face.” The countess began to make the changes that she spoke of, adjusting Latica’s curls.

“Ouch!” Latica cried out.

“Do stop complaining. Pain is beauty, as you know.”

As Eliza watched this take place, she couldn't help but muse about how different her mother had been from her aunt. Eliza's mother was always gentle and quick to encourage Eliza and pay her compliments.

“Now, let's have a look at you,” the countess said, turning her attention to Eliza, who instantly felt a knot form in her stomach. “You exhibit much the same problem.” Lady Frederica brought her hands to Eliza's head, who tried not to wince as changes were made.

Once Eliza's scalp had been tortured for a considerable amount of time, the countess finally expressed that she was satisfied. Now all three of them peered into the mirror, the countess wearing a deep shade of blue.

“I think that we all shall make quite the impression.” There was pride in Lady Frederica's voice. “Now, come downstairs to join Henrietta.”

The two girls followed the countess down the stairs. When they were in the parlour once more, they discovered Henrietta seated in an overstuffed chair, her green gown submerging her.

“We cannot wear the same shade!” Henrietta protested. “Why didn't you inform me that you were wearing green?”

Eliza coloured. “I... It was a surprise to me. Latica lent me the gown.”

Henrietta scowled and scolded her sister. “You did this on purpose, Latica.”

“I promise that I did not!”

“Mother,” Henrietta reprimanded, “inform Eliza to go upstairs and change at once.”

Lady Frederica huffed but then nodded in agreement. “Eliza, do as Henrietta says.”

“But, I own nothing that is the right colour.”

The countess’s voice fell flat. “Select something, nonetheless.”

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